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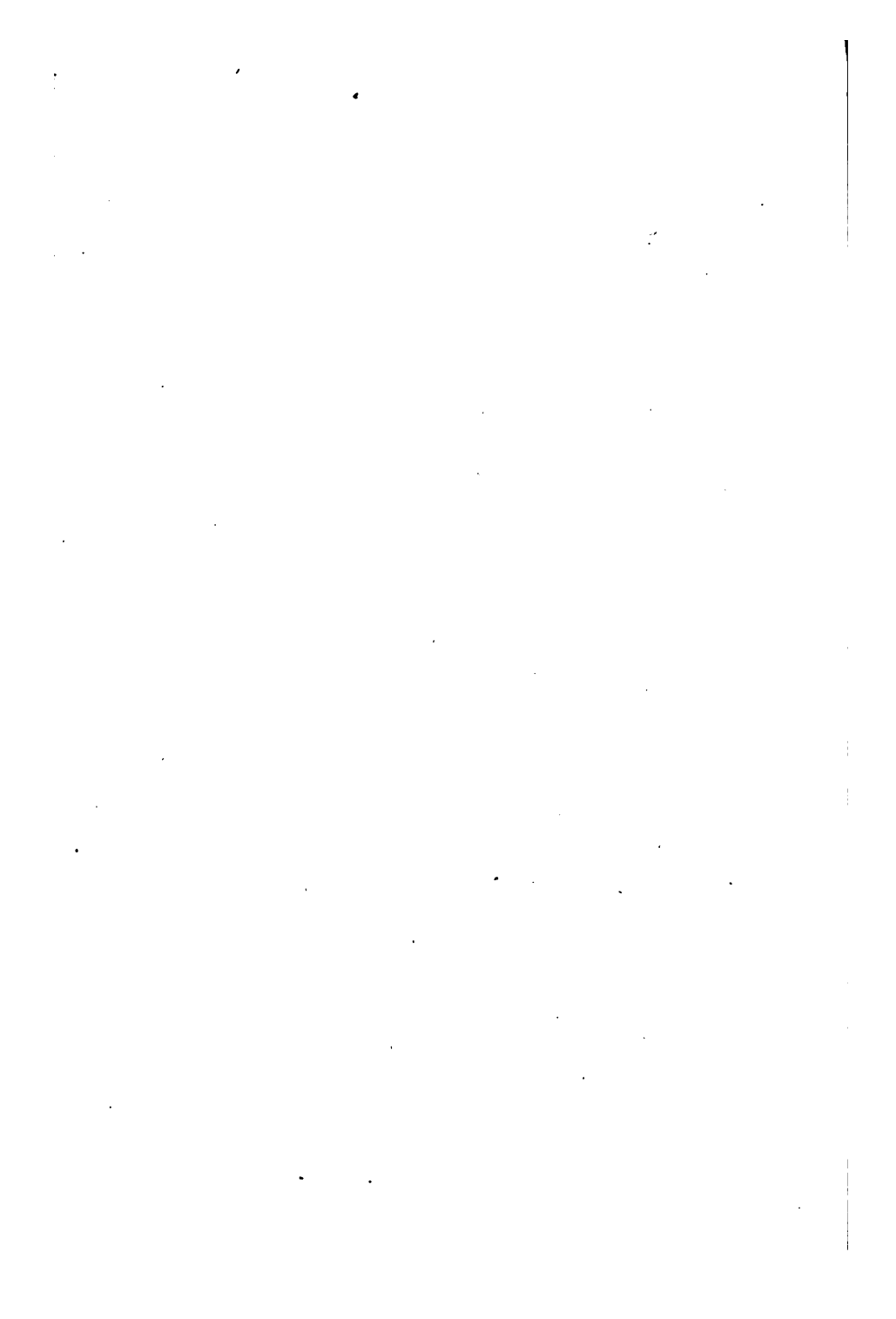
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# ALDERSLEIGH.

A Tale.

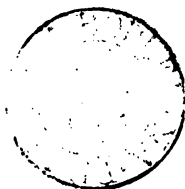
BY

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# ALDERSLEIGH.

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## CHAPTER XVI.

### THE WILL.

THE worthy lawyer was not the man to procrastinate in any matter of importance, especially where the wishes and interests of a friend were concerned. On receipt of the Squire's letter, he laboured hard to despatch the more urgent business in hand, gave directions to his clerks with regard to the less weighty affairs, found time to bid a hasty farewell to the ladies in Russell Square, and that same afternoon was on his road to Aldersleigh. He arrived late at the Hall, and was at once admitted to the presence of his host, by the side of the fire in the library.

"I think it very kind of you, Strong," said the Squire, after the first greeting, "to have attended so quickly to my request. But sit down, and let me order you some refreshment."

"I shall not be sorry to break my fast, Squire, as I had no time to get dinner before leaving town. But a crust of bread and a glass of wine will be all I shall require; and then to business."

"Come, come! there is no such hurry. It is long since we met, and we shall have much to talk over. But the Samuel Strong I remember had always an appetite for something better than crusts. William, tell Mrs. Sutton to see what dinner can be got ready at the shortest notice, and, in the meanwhile, bring up a bottle of the old Madeira."

There was something cheery and cordial about the Squire's manner, which struck the lawyer as different from what he had remarked in him for many years past. His cheek, too, was less pallid, and his eye brighter than when they had last met, and altogether he looked fresher and younger.

"I am very glad to find you so well, Squire,"



said Strong, "and I hope our friend Goodenough is equally flourishing."

"Thank you, he is well and hearty as ever. As for me, you know, I am like a candle nearly burnt out, which flames up in the socket at a sudden whiff of air, and the sight of an old friend is to me what the wind is to the candle. How are Mrs. Strong and the young ladies?"

"Thank you, I left them in first-rate health and spirits. If I had had more time, I think Emma would have come with me on a visit to Mary Goodenough. Both my girls are very fond of the Vicar's daughter, though I must own they are not in the least like her."

"It does credit to their taste," said the Squire. "And when did you last see Mr. Reginald Vaughan?"

"He was with us a night or two ago, and I took some pains to teach him to play a rubber; but his genius does not lie in that direction. He made nothing but misdeals and revokes, and seemed to be thinking of something else all the time."

"I will tell you what it was," said the Squire,

with a significant smile. "He was thinking of Mary Goodenough."

"Oh! is it so?" exclaimed the lawyer, rubbing his hands. "I had no suspicion of this; but I am very glad to hear it. She is a sweet girl, and, in spite of his ignorance of whist, he is a very fine young fellow. Only, I wonder my Emma never found it out. But perhaps she did, and kept it from her old father. They are all artful minxes in these matters."

"I believe," said the Squire, "that the young people wished their engagement to be kept quiet, until they had some chance of marrying. What are Reginald's prospects at the bar?"

"Like the prospects of most beginners, very uncertain. But he has two great requisites for success—energy and perseverance."

"And it used to be said, Strong, that fortune favoured the brave. I am not so sure of that, for I have known brave and true men very unfortunate."

"What is called fortune," answered the lawyer, "depends greatly on ourselves. I do not mean,

that Heaven in its wisdom may not see fit to afflict us with calamities against which no prudence could guard, or to endow us with blessings which we had no right to expect. But for the most part, and in the common course of events, we reap as we sow, and the best farmer gets the best harvest."

"I cannot dispute with you, Strong. I have known some lives on which the blight and the mildew fell early, and which never came to any fruit. Still, I will hope better things for this young man and his destined bride. I would fain help them if I could."

27 "Well," said the lawyer, with a keen glance from under his shaggy brows, "it might even be possible to do that. But what of this Mr. Higgins and his claims? Have you made up your mind to acknowledge him as your heir?"

"Do you still hold that he has proved his case?"

"Certainly. I have no doubt of it. I have sifted the evidence thoroughly, and am convinced of its truth."

"And how should you like to see him master of this house, Strong?"

"I should be sorry to see any master here, Squire, but the one I have known so long. As for the man himself, he is (I suppose) a worthy descendant of his grandfather the bagman."

"You are perhaps doing injustice to the grandfather. *He* may have been a good, honest man, respectable and respected in his station. But this fellow has all the vulgar presumption of an ignorant, purse-proud upstart."

"He is certainly very unlike the former owners of Aldersleigh," said the lawyer, "especially as he is a violent Radical in politics, and already talks of contesting the county on the ultra-liberal interest. But, for all that, he has the next claim to the land."

"But surely," said the Squire, rising from his chair in great agitation, "you do not hold it to be a *moral* claim? You know that I have always thought the right of succession in the direct line most sacred; but am I called upon (if I have the power to prevent it) to let the home of my ancestors fall into the hands of a fellow who talks of putting up an Italian front to it, and turning it into a Reform Club?"

"My dear Squire," answered Strong, with a touch of sly humour in his voice and look, "I can only tell you the law, and must leave you to decide on the morality of the case. If you die intestate, Mr. Higgins has a legal title to the estate; in the mean time, you have a legal right to dispose of it as you please. You must judge for yourself whether there is any family obligation to a person, who seems scarcely to have heard of the family name or existence until a few months ago."

"I do not think there can be," said the Squire, with serious emphasis; "I really do not think there can be. Even if his name were Vaughan—I mean by birth—it might make a difference. I would not do anything unjust for the world; but you are not really of opinion that justice requires me to leave the land to this Mr. Higgins?"

"You have only to do nothing, Squire, and he will succeed to the inheritance. The question is, whether you can dispose of it to some better purpose. If you can, I tell you, as your lawyer, that you have the right to do so. And if you ask me as your

friend, I will add that, in my humble opinion, you ought to do so."

"I am much obliged to you, Strong," said the Squire, recovering his equanimity. "Now that I have your opinion I shall be better satisfied to act on my own judgment. But here comes your dinner, of which you must excuse me from partaking. You know the state of my health, and I hope you will not let my abstinence spoil your appetite."

"Trust me for that," answered the lawyer, as he sat down to the repast. "We have known each other too long for ceremony, and I am sufficiently hungry to do full justice to Mrs. Sutton's excellent fare. Dinner is a great institution, and a very pleasant interlude in this life of ours. I pledge you in a glass of the old Madeira, Squire."

"I must join you in that," said the elder gentleman, as he filled a glass for himself with a trembling hand. "It is the same wine which your father drank with my father, when you were a boy at school, and I was a young man at college."

It has lost none of its virtues, while most other things are altered for the worse."

"Not all, I hope, Squire. Both you and I belong to a past generation, and are perhaps a little unreasonable in our judgment of the present. But even we can see good qualities in some of our younger friends—Reginald Vaughan, for instance, and Mary Goodenough."

"That is because they are more like what we prized in youth than most of the new generation. But I agree with you, Strong, and just now those two young people occupy a large portion of my thoughts. I am interested, very much interested in their future fate, and if——"

The Squire paused in the midst of his speech, and, leaning his head upon his hand, remained for a long time silent. The lawyer looked at him curiously, but did not attempt to disturb his meditations, and continued his own dinner with every appearance of satisfaction. At length the Squire lifted his eyes to the face of his old friend and counsellor, and addressed him in a voice that trembled with emotion.

"I have taken a great resolution, Strong," he said, "and I mean to act on it. I will not leave Aldersleigh to the tender mercies of this Radical idiot. I will choose my own heir, and I think you can guess his name."

"I shall not be far wrong," answered the lawyer, filling his glass, "if I drink this bumper to the health of Reginald Vaughan."

"Of course, you guess it," continued the Squire. "A Vaughan of the elder branch—a soldier, a scholar, and a gentleman—how can I hesitate between him and Mr. Higgins? If there were no other reason, it would be enough for me, that I have the power to substitute a gentleman for a clown in the possession of my father's land. But there is much more in it than that. I feel for this lad as I never thought to feel again for any young man: he is engaged to a girl who has been to me *almost* as a daughter; and there comes a warmth about my heart, to which it has long been a stranger, when I think of them and their children in the old places that were once so dear to me. Well, I have now your assurance that I



can bring this to pass. You shall prepare my will, settling the estate on Reginald after my death. But I do not mean him to wait till then to marry. I will make him an allowance at once, as my adopted son and heir ; and, on his wedding-day, I will charge the land with a proper dowry for his wife."

"I am very glad to hear this," said Strong, pushing away his plate, and rising from the table ; "and, if you like, we can set about it directly."

"Now, my dear friend, you always were so very impatient, that I could never keep up with you. At all events, I shall say no more till you have finished your dinner."

"My maxim is to strike while the iron's hot," answered the lawyer. "However, the dinner will not detain us long, as I have already made good progress. I shall be at your service in a few minutes."

And the man of business sat down again to his meal, with the air of one who is in haste to keep an engagement. In spite of the Squire's remonstrances, he would hurry over the repast, and

brought it to an end much sooner than could have been expected.

When the table was cleared, and only the wine remained before him, he flew to get pen, ink, and paper, and arranged them carefully within reach of his hand. Then, seating himself comfortably by the fire, he turned to his old friend with a look of warm and eager interest, and said: "Now, Squire, I am ready."

But the Squire had thrown himself back in his chair, and seemed weary and exhausted after the animation he had lately displayed. "No, no," he muttered faintly; "I am not equal to business to-night. We will talk quietly this evening, and to-morrow we will do what is necessary."

"But you need not exert yourself at all," persisted the lawyer. "Just give me your directions, and the whole thing may be done very quickly. When the will is ready, we can send for some of the servants as witnesses, and you have only to sign your name. It will be a great relief to your mind, and a great satisfaction to know that the affair is settled."

"No, I tell you!" said the Squire, almost angrily. "It *is* settled, but I must not be driven in this way. Forgive me, Strong," he added, after a short pause, "if I seem hasty and peevish. Lay the blame to my irritable nerves, and not to any want of regard for you. I promise, that to-morrow we will set to work in earnest. But I am really not up to it to-night."

"Of course, I cannot urge you further," said the lawyer, as he replaced the pen on the standish; "but I shall remind you of your promise in the morning, and not let you off so easily."

"I shall be calmer and clearer after a night's rest," answered the Squire. "Besides, we shall want other witnesses, for I mean to leave legacies to all the servants. Then I should like to consult Goodenough on two or three points of detail. You have waited so many years to make my will, Strong," he added, with a smile, "that surely you can wait till the morning."

"I must needs do so," replied the lawyer, "because there is no help for it. I know of old

that I cannot persuade you, when you once get into the positive mood."

"I dare say you are right, Strong. I dare say I have been a queer, impracticable, obstinate old fellow—very ungrateful, very troublesome to my friends. I may even have been too selfish in the indulgence of a great sorrow. But, believe me, in my worst moods I have not been quite insensible to kindness, and yours has never failed me through all my years of mourning."

"My dear Squire," said the lawyer, much affected, "you could not suppose for a moment that I meant to reproach you with want of friendship, or to impute any blame to you except in jest."

"No, my dear Strong, I am sure you meant nothing of the sort. But of late I have come to reproach myself for many things. If I had to live my life over again, I hope I should do better; I hope I should submit myself more humbly to the Divine Will, and endeavour to be more active in the service of my fellow-creatures. That cannot be now; I have so little time left in this world.

But it will be some comfort if a better man than I have been is ready to take my place. And you and Goodenough will give him wholesome advice, and he will follow it, which is more than I ever did. There may be good days for Aldersleigh yet in store."

"I hope so, with all my heart," said the lawyer; "and I hope you may live to see many of them, Squire."

"That may hardly be, my dear friend. For me the hour of rest must be near at hand. Often and often I have wished for its coming; but now I feel as if I should like to stay here a little longer, just to see these young folks married and happy, and perhaps to hold in my arms an infant heir of Aldersleigh."

"God grant it may be so, Squire!"

"Amen!" said the old man, solemnly; "but, happen what may, His will be done! However, we will talk of these things another time. It grows late, and I am getting very tired. You know my early habits, and will excuse my wishing you good-night."

"Well, William, is your master stirring?" he asked, as he entered the house.

"No, sir; he has not rung his bell yet. I am just going up to see if he is awake."

The lawyer strolled into the library, and sat down to read; but he had scarcely opened a book when he was startled by the loud ringing of bells, followed by the shrieks of women. He rushed from the room, and the first person he encountered was Mrs. Sutton, the venerable housekeeper. She was pale and trembling, and her clasped hands were lifted with a gesture of despair, but all she could say in answer to his inquiries was: "Oh, sir! my master! my poor master!"

The lawyer darted up the stairs, and into the Squire's bedroom. What had happened was at once only too apparent. There lay the lifeless form of the master of the house, with William, bathed in tears, bending over him, and the other servants gathered in consternation about the bed. He had died in the night, suddenly, and in all probability without pain or warning of any kind. The lawyer, half choking with emotion, took the

hand of his old friend in his own, and found that it was already quite cold. But the face was very calm, and there was a beautiful smile upon the lips—a smile which seemed to say that the worn and weary spirit was now at peace, and that the long hunger of the loving and suffering soul had been satisfied at last.

## CHAPTER XVII.

## THE FUNERAL.

THE news of the Squire's death soon spread through the neighbouring country, and brought many visitors to the Hall. One of the first to arrive was Dr. Goodenough, who reached the place before the nearest medical practitioner, and long before the physicians summoned in hot haste from Malvern and Worcester. Of course, the last-named gentlemen could only pronounce that all was over, and that, in their opinion, nothing could have been done to avert the catastrophe. They argued, that in a man of Mr. Vaughan's constitution, advanced in life, and



long known to have been in feeble health, a sudden death was in no way surprising, and might even have been anticipated; and they gave excellent scientific reasons for this view of the subject. But, as these could now avail very little, they soon took their departure, and returned to their several homes; and many others, whom curiosity had drawn to the spot, also dropped off one by one, and left the old house at Aldersleigh to the real mourners for the dead.

Every servant in the house was of that number, for, strange and reserved as had been the Squire's mode of life, he was loved and respected by those about him. But his loss was still more keenly felt by the two old friends who now sat together in the library, talking over what he had been to them in past times, and what were his last wishes in this world.

"I tell you, my dear Goodenough," said Strong, "that his mind was full of your daughter and her destined husband. His chief wish was that they should succeed him at Aldersleigh. What

a pity it is that the will was not made last night !”

“ I do not think of that,” answered the Vicar. “ Perhaps it is better as it is, for any such arrangement might have occasioned disputes and scandal. But I feel all the kindness of our old friend’s intentions.”

“ A fig for the scandal, if the will had but been signed !” said Strong. “ I would have taken care that there should be no flaw in it. And, as for his intentions, I should like not only to appreciate them, but to carry them out to the letter. I much fear that they will now be completely frustrated.”

“ He is gone where the fate of house and land can be of no moment to him,” replied the Vicar ; “ and I trust he will there find such happiness as he never enjoyed on earth.”

“ I hope so too ; but it does not make me the less sorry that I cannot fulfil his wishes. After all, the best homage the survivors can render to the dead is to comply with their directions as far as possible. Of course I mean when those direc-

tions are not manifestly immoral ; and, in this case, they were eminently wise and just."

"And this Mr. Higgins will, I suppose, be the heir?" asked the Vicar.

"Yes ; and that reminds me, it will be my duty to write to him by to-day's post. As the late Squire's solicitor, I am in charge here for the present ; but I shall be glad to resign my trust as soon as I can do so with propriety. When I leave I may ask you for a bed at the Vicarage, Goodenough, for of course I should wish to be present at the funeral."

"My dear Strong, the new owner will hardly disturb you before then !"

"I do not know. He will have the right to make what arrangements he pleases, and I am not anxious to cultivate very close relations with him. Besides, the place will be very sad to me now."

"Sad enough to both of us, my dear friend ; still, we can never cease to feel interested in the old house. Poor Reginald too ! all here will be different to him from what it was at his last visit.

But I am sure that he also will wish to pay the last honours to the Squire."

"Certainly. Write to him by all means, and ask him to come down. He may claim the privilege of a kinsman to attend the funeral. Now I think of it, I will not write to Mr. Higgins himself, but to Sharp, his attorney. That fellow has a head on his shoulders, and will know what is proper and decent under the circumstances."

"And I must go and comfort my poor Mary, who has been both grieved and shocked at this sudden bereavement. Shall I return to you here, or will you come to the Vicarage?"

"I think I must remain here, to attend to what is indispensable. I could not bear to leave our old friend to servants only."

"Our friend is gone," said the Vicar. "But I agree with you. Even the cold remains demand thus much of service at our hands."

They parted with moist eyes, and went about their different tasks. In the evening they were again together, and they sat talking till late in the night over the fire in the library.

In the course of the next day Reginald Vaughan arrived at the Vicarage, and Mr. Sharp, the lawyer, at Aldersleigh. The latter came to take possession on behalf of his client, and was prepared for conciliatory or hostile measures, according to the nature of his reception. Mr. Strong put him at once at his ease, by dealing with him frankly and explicitly. He made no secret of his own wishes, or what had been the Squire's intentions; but he admitted the legal right of Mr. Higgins, and declared there was no desire in any quarter to contest his claim to the estate. Mr. Sharp was wise enough to see the advantage of settling such a matter amicably, and he always acted on the maxim never to make enemies unnecessarily. He was, therefore, extremely courteous in his treatment of Mr. Strong, and begged he would remain at the Hall, and continue to direct the arrangements for the funeral.

"As my senior in the profession," he said, "your advice, my dear sir, would at all times be valuable to me. But here, and at this time especially, from your intimate acquaintance with all

that concerns the late Squire and his affairs, I really could not dispense with your kind assistance. I speak in the name of Mr. Higgins as well as my own."

"I should not think of interfering with you or him," answered Strong, "but I will gladly do all in my power to help in paying respect to my old friend's memory."

"To be sure, to be sure, my dear sir; that is just what I intended. You will oblige me, for instance, by naming what guests ought to be invited."

"I suppose Mr. Higgins will come himself?" asked Strong.

"Can you doubt it, my dear sir? Nearest relative and chief mourner. And, between ourselves, it will be very desirable he should be brought into contact with the gentry of the county on such an occasion. An excellent man, I assure you, but, as you are aware, a *novus homo*."

"I have nothing to do with that, Mr. Sharp. He is entitled to the first place—we will leave the word *mourner* out of the question; but I should

claim the second for my young friend Mr. Reginald Vaughan, who is also related to the family."

"Nothing could be more proper, my dear sir. Believe me, Mr. Higgins will be greatly indebted to you—I may say truly grateful—if you and the worthy clergyman of this parish (who was also, I am informed, an intimate friend of the late Squire's) will arrange these matters as you may think best."

"Be it so," said Strong. "It will probably be the last service I shall render to the old name."

Meanwhile, Reginald and Mary had met at the Vicarage, and imparted to each other the feelings excited by the late event. The loss of the Squire would in any case have caused them unfeigned sorrow, and when the Vicar informed them of their old friend's unfulfilled intentions with regard to themselves, they were both deeply touched by this new instance of his kindness. But they did not indulge in selfish regrets at the failure of his plans for their benefit, or, if they talked of the subject at all, it was chiefly to express a

fear that Aldersleigh might fall into unworthy hands.

Mr. Higgins did not make his appearance at the manor-house till a late hour on the night before the funeral. He was in a tolerably good humour, and evidently anxious to be civil to Strong, having probably received some hint from his own lawyer as to the expediency of conciliating the friends of his predecessor.

"Sorry to leave you all by yourself, Mr. Strong, or with nobody but Sharp to keep you company; but if there's one thing I hate more than another, it's a gloomy old house with the shutters up. My spirits can't stand it, and I think there's a great deal too much of that sort of nonsense. When a man's dead, the sooner he's buried the better. Can't bring him to life again, you know, and what's the good of making people miserable?"

"It is entirely a matter of feeling, Mr. Higgins."

"That's just what I say—all feeling, and no common sense. But you must not think that I don't wish to pay every respect to the old gentleman. I've brought carriage, and horses, and all



the rest, to follow him—all the way from London, Mr. Strong—and I wrote to Sharp there to spare no expense on the funeral. I shouldn't like to be thought shabby on such an occasion. But I tell you what, Sharp, I wish you'd ring the bell, and see what there is in the house for supper. I'm monstrous hungry, and one must keep up one's strength, you know, even under the most melancholy circumstances."

When the day of the funeral came, there was a large assembly in the old house at Aldersleigh. Many of the neighbouring gentry, who had scarcely seen the late Squire for years, had retained a kindly feeling towards him, and were anxious to show their respect for his memory. As they were ushered into the great drawing-room, long disused, they exchanged grave and silent greetings, or withdrew into corners, and conversed together in whispers.

"Poor Vaughan!" said an old gentleman to his younger friend; "I remember a ball in this very room, to celebrate the birthday of one of his children. Mrs. Vaughan was then as lovely a

woman as you ever saw. And now he, and she, and all are gone. By-the-bye, who is this heir they talk of?"

"His name is Higgins," answered the other, "and he has just now been pointed out to me. There he stands, in front of the fire—the fat man, with the red face."

"That fellow!" exclaimed the old gentleman. "I really thought he was the undertaker!"

"Mr. Higgins," said Strong, going up to the new master of the house, "allow me to introduce Mr. Reginald Vaughan, of whom I have already spoken to you."

"Very glad to see him, I'm sure. One of the family, I understand."

"I think," said Reginald, "that Mr. Higgins and I have met before."

"Why, so we have, now I come to look at you. I remember quite well. It was one evening last summer, at Malvern, and we smoked our cigars together, and had a very pleasant chat; only, if I recollect right, you had taken a little too much champagne."

"Your recollection is at fault there, Mr. Higgins."

"Well, never mind, my boy; never tell tales out of school. I really am very glad to see you, as a friend, and a relation, and all that sort of thing. And I bear no malice, though I'm told that you very nearly cut me out of the estate. All fair, you know; I should have done the same in your place."

"Mr. Higgins," said Reginald, indignantly, "if you suppose that I took any steps to influence the disposal of this property, you have been grossly misinformed."

"All right, my dear fellow! don't put yourself in a passion. I meant no offence, and I want to be on good terms with you. We are to be chief mourners for the old Squire, and it wouldn't look well for us to quarrel, you know."

"I should indeed be sorry, Mr. Higgins, for anything of the kind to happen."

"Well, then, shake hands, and let's be friends. When we come to see more of each other, I dare say we shall be as thick as thieves. You seem to

be hand and glove with some of these nobs, Mr. Strong. I wish you would introduce them to *me*."

"I have the pleasure of knowing some of the gentlemen of the county, certainly," said the lawyer, "and I will introduce *you* to *them*, Mr. Higgins, if you wish it. But I would suggest, that it might be better to wait till after the ceremony. At present, the minds of most of us are engaged with graver thoughts."

"Hang it! I forgot that," replied Higgins, with a rueful grimace; "but of course it is very proper, and I am much obliged to you for reminding me. I wish those confounded undertakers wouldn't be so long about it!"

They had yet, however, to wait some little time; and then, the preparations being completed, the guests were duly marshalled to their places, and the solemn procession started from the Hall. As it passed down the long avenue, with all the usual pageantry of plumes and sables, the country people crowded to witness the spectacle, with many signs of curiosity, and some of

genuine sorrow. The Vicar met the corpse at the church door, and it was in a full, deep voice, tremulous with emotion, that he read the grandest and most pathetic of church services. As the coffin was lowered into the family vault, and the clods fell with a dull sound on the emblazoned velvet—"earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust"—many cheeks were wet, and sobs were heard from more than one group of spectators. Strong shaded his face with his hand, but his huge frame shook with the intensity of his feelings; Reginald stood motionless, with bowed head, and eyes fixed on the pavement; and Mary sat in a pew apart, weeping silently. The tenants and servants all showed traces of personal interest in the mournful scene, and even the rubicund visage of Morris the bailiff was stained with tears.

In the midst of this general display of simple and natural sentiment, Mr. Higgins exhibited nothing but tokens of callous indifference and restless impatience. He moved about uneasily, looked at his watch, played with his hat, thrust

his hand into his pocket, and balanced himself on one leg, while his face wore the blank expression of a person utterly careless of what was passing around him. It brightened up wonderfully, however, as soon as the service was concluded, and while most of those present lingered to take a last look into the dark vault, he seemed chiefly intent on getting back to the Hall to luncheon.

"I suppose they will all come," he whispered to Reginald. "I've ordered a regular spread, and plenty of lush. I'm sure they must all want it after this melancholy business."

To these and other similar observations Reginald made no reply, but accompanied his fellow-mourner in silence from the church. The rest followed in their train, but many took their departure at the park-gate, not wishing to revisit the Hall or to share in its hospitalities. The Vicar and Mr. Strong would have preferred doing the same, but they felt that, from their old connection with Aldersleigh, they could hardly separate themselves from the procession on its return to the manor-house.

The banquet was, as might have been expected, a very uncomfortable one. Mr. Higgins made many attempts to entertain his guests, and affected a tone of facetiousness which was altogether incongruous and out of place. Most of the company were in a serious mood, and the conversation of their host jarred on their feelings. The Vicar was sad and silent, Mr. Strong inaccessible and morose, and the majority of the faces round the table looked weary and discontented. Mr. Sharp had sagacity enough to perceive the awkwardness of the situation, and tried to relieve it by introducing some general topics; but the endeavour was only partially successful. Every one was glad when the repast came to an end, and the guests were at liberty to depart on their several ways.

"I shall go back to town to-morrow," said Mr. Higgins. "Parliamentary duties, you know, and all that sort of bother. I shall not come down here till the autumn, but Sharp will put things in train for me. You will find Sharp a very *sharp* chap, Dr. Goodenough, and I dare say

he will give you a wrinkle or two in the management of the parish. Hope to see you in London, Mr. Vaughan; and you, Mr. Strong. Wish you a very good day, gentlemen, and hope we shall all be jolly at our next meeting!"

And with this appropriate valediction from the new master of Aldersleigh, the mourners left the Hall on the day of the Squire's funeral.

"That fellow is too much for human patience to bear with," said Strong, as he walked back to the village with Reginald and the Vicar. "I could hardly restrain myself from putting him down at his own table. *His* table, indeed! To think that he should fill the place so long occupied by the Vaughans of Aldersleigh!"

"It is painful, I grant, to see him in the seat of our old friend," returned the Vicar; "but, after all, he has only taken what he is entitled to by law, and it is not his fault that nature and education have made him unfit for the position. Besides, he may have good qualities with which we are yet unacquainted."

"Good qualities!" muttered Strong. "A bear



may have good qualities in his native wilds but I had rather not sit down to dinner with him."

"Well, well," said the Vicar, "let us think no more of him to-day. Our hearts are in the old church yonder, with him whose mortal remains we laid in the vault beneath. Much as we shall miss him, we can scarcely regret that his long time of trial is over."

"If it be not presumptuous," said Reginald, "I would fain picture him as meeting his wife and children in that happier world. You believe we have warrant for such hopes, Doctor?"

"I believe," answered the Vicar, "that He who planted the affections deep in the human breast, and made them our best source of happiness here, will not leave them ungratified hereafter. I believe that He will restore the lost."

"I do not grieve for the poor old Squire," said Strong. "I have confidence enough in my Maker to leave my friend in His hands without fear and without repining. But I *do* grieve for the ending

of an ancient line and the extinction of an honoured name."

"Come, come," returned the Vicar, pointing to Reginald, "the name is not extinct yet."

"I beg your pardon, Vaughan," cried Strong, seizing his young friend by the hand. "I have no doubt you will bear the name as nobly as any of your ancestors. But I wish you had the land."

"Thank you, my dear sir, but I certainly do not regret what I never had any reason to expect. My associations with Aldersleigh have indeed been rudely broken by this sudden change in the ownership of the property; yet, as far as I am personally concerned, I have nothing whatever to complain of."

"That is true, Reginald," said the Vicar; "and, my dear boy, if I know you and my own daughter as I think I do, neither you nor she will ever pine for house or land. I agree with you, Strong, that it is sad to see the glory of the old place departing. But it is the common lot of humanity."

'So fails, so languishes, grows dim, and dies,  
All that this world is proud of. From their spheres  
The stars of human glory are cast down ;  
Perish the roses and the flowers of kings,  
Princes, and emperors ; and the crowns and palms  
Of all the mighty, withered and consumed !  
Nor is power given to lowliest Innocence  
Long to protect her own. The man himself  
Departs ; and soon is spent the line of those  
Who, in the bodily image, in the mind,  
In heart or soul, in station or pursuit,  
Did most resemble him.'

And, when they are all gone, as the same poet  
tells us :

—— ' Nature's pleasant robe of green,  
Humanity's appointed shroud, enwraps  
Their monuments and their memory.' "

" And who wrote those pathetic lines ?" asked  
the lawyer.

" I forgot you knew nothing about Wordsworth,"  
answered the Vicar, smiling. " He is the poet,  
whom we learn to love most in sorrow."

Thus conversing together in grave and tender  
mood, the three friends reached the Vicarage, and  
were welcomed by Mary, looking pale but lovelier  
than ever in her neat mourning dress. The re-

mainder of the day was spent in quiet talk, not sad, but sober and subdued, and coloured by the respect and affection which all there cherished for the memory of the good old Squire.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

## NEW BROOMS.

**B**EFORE Reginald left Worcestershire for London, he went once more with Mary to visit the old Hall and the woods of Aldersleigh. As yet most things were in their former condition, but some changes had already begun. They found Mrs. Sutton, the housekeeper, and William, the butler, in great anxiety and distress. Mr. Sharp had been very civil to them (too civil by half, William said), but he had intimated that Mr. Higgins would bring down with him a whole domestic establishment, and that their services would not be required after the next month or two.

"I never thought to be turned away in my old age," said William, "after living fifty years man

and boy in the same house, and never a word from my master except a kind one, even when he was plagued with the gout, and half mad with all sorts of trouble."

"And I always hoped to die in my own bed," whimpered Mrs. Sutton, "where I have slept snug and warm many a long night, and where, too, I've often lain awake listening for the bell, when my mistress was sick, and none like me to nurse her—none like me and your poor mother, Miss Mary, when you was a little baby, and *our* children still in the nursery. Never did I think to leave the dear old place."

"It is really too bad," said Mary, with tears of indignation in her mild blue eyes. "Could you have imagined, Reginald, that any one would be so cruel as to turn off old servants like these? Can nothing be done to prevent it?"

"I should be afraid, dearest, that any interference would only make matters worse. By-and-by a man like your father may acquire some influence with Mr. Higgins; but for the present we can do nothing."

"And where will you go when you leave Aldersleigh?" asked Mary.

"Well, miss," replied William, "I have saved up enough to keep me out of the workhouse, and I dare say Mrs. Sutton can say as much. It isn't for the sake of the victuals and wages, but we never thought to be turned out of our old home."

"I will speak to my father, and see if we can't find room at the Vicarage for *dear aunty*, as I used to call Mrs. Sutton when I was a little girl. And as for you, William, I am sure there are plenty of gentlemen that will be only too glad to have you, if you like to take another place."

"Thank you kindly, miss, but I will never go into service in any other house. I shall find a corner somewhere to finish the few days that are left me."

"And I wouldn't be a trouble to you and the Vicar, Miss Mary," said the old woman.

"Nonsense, dear aunty; it will be so nice to have you with us, and we shall have so much to talk about. But let us go over the house once

more. Mr. Vaughan may not like to come here when you are away."

"God bless you both!" said Mrs. Sutton, wiping her eyes. "Ah! if I could but have seen you in the master's place!"

"I hope you may live to see us in a snug little house of our own, Mrs. Sutton," said Reginald; "where you and William would always be welcome, both for your own sakes, and for the sake of him that is gone."

Then the housekeeper produced her keys, and the lovers strolled from room to room, taking, as it were, a farewell survey of all the treasures of the mansion. They lingered over every relic, and felt loth to depart from each well-remembered spot. The morning wore away in this occupation; yet before returning to the Vicarage they resolved to go round by the woods, and to come back by way of the farm. On their road they encountered Morris, the bailiff.

"Your servant, Miss Mary; your servant, Mr. Vaughan. Them storms have played the mischief among the old trees. But it's no matter



now, I suppose, for it must all go to ruin together."

"I hope not, Morris. What makes you think so badly of the future?"

"Why, sir, isn't there a new master, who knows no more about the place than a cockney does of the difference atween wheat and barley?"

"He will learn, Morris, and you must teach him.' He has plenty of money, and you will show him how to lay it out to advantage on the estate."

"Not I, sir. You will not find me here long. Mr. Sharp tells me there's a Scotch bailiff coming down, a monstrous clever fellow, with all kinds of new inventions, and he wanted me to act with him as under-bailiff—just to put him up to a thing or two, I suppose, because he's strange to this part of the country, and then to be sent about my business. But I knew better than that, and so I shall have to leave. I'm sorry to part with the pigs and the cattle and the horses; but I'd just as soon have no truck with strangers and new-fangled people."

"This Mr. Sharp seems to be very quick in his movements, Morris."

"Quick, sir! I should think so. He takes one's breath away. Besides, he's a regular screw, and would skin a flea for its hide. He says there's much more to be got out of the land, and he wants to raise all the rents. Thank God and our old master, most of the tenants have leases, and can't be turned off at a moment's notice. But what he *can* do to grind them down he *will*."

"And what is to become of the labourers?" asked Mary.

"Ah, poor fellows! they will be the worst off. Mr. Sharp means to take the bits of gardens from them, which they all had rent-free from the old Squire. He's a great political commonist, he is, and he thinks such things interfere with the natural rate of wages."

"Perhaps," said Mary, "when Mr. Higgins comes down, he will not sanction all these changes."

"I don't know, miss; but I wouldn't venture

much upon that chance. Pigs may fly, but they're very unlikely birds."

"Well, Morris," said Reginald, "it is a good thing for the parish that no one can turn Dr. Goodenough out of the Vicarage. While he is there, the poor will never want a friend and adviser."

"That's some comfort, certainly, sir; and I don't mean to say that Mr. Higgins and Mr. Sharp will have their own way in everything. We are Englishmen, not Roossians, and we know what the gentry *can* do to us, and what they *can't*. But it makes a great difference to a place, whether the people look on the Squire as a friend or enemy."

"An immense difference," replied Reginald; "and it will be a bad day for England if the ties which have hitherto united the two classes should ever be broken."

"And it is a bad day for Aldersleigh, sir, when we have to change Squire Vaughan for Squire Higgins."

"Well, Morris, we must make the best of it.

An experienced farmer like you will never want for employment."

"I'm not afraid of that, sir. I think I know as much about farming as any outlandish Scotchman, and I can fight my own way in the world."

"But you will come and see my father, Morris," said Mary, "and talk over your prospects with him. He may be able to help you."

"Never fear, Miss Mary; I know my road to the Vicarage, and I'm sure of a welcome when I get there. And some day, Mr. Vaughan, you may be taking to farming; and I'd be ready to work for you, whatever else I might be doing, for the credit of the old name."

"Very well, Morris, that's a bargain; though I do not see much hope of my ever becoming an agriculturist. I shall have more to do with law than husbandry, and must spend my time among sheep-skins rather than sheep."

When they had taken leave of the bailiff, the lovers continued their walk, and met Jack Rough with a ponderous load of wood, which he was carrying down to the farm.

"We are like sailors after a storm, master," he said, "saving what we can of the wreck of the old timbers. Many a tall tree's been blown down, and many a fine ship lost in these gales, I warrant. There'll be good stock of firewood here next winter, when I'm far away from Aldersleigh."

"Are you going too, Jack?" asked Reginald.

"Why, what should I do here, master, when all's tumbling to pieces? Master Morris will soon be off, and the servants at the Hall, and the old gardeners, and some of the hands about the farm. That lawyer chap has told 'em they wouldn't be wanted. I shall not wait to be sent away, but make up my bundle, and walk."

"And where will you go?" said Mary.

"Oh, missus, that's more than I can tell! But thanks to you, and your father, and Master Vaughan there, I'm as sound and hearty as ever I was in my life, and wouldn't turn my back on any man in England, for a day's work, or a trial of strength. I shall find a way of earning my bread, I promise you."

"You will let us know where you are?" asked Reginald.

"Well, Master Vaughan, I'm no scholar, and writing don't come easy to me. But you shall hear of me some day, if you care about it. I should be a precious rascal, if ever I forgot what you've done for a poor beggar like I am."

"And mind, Jack, if ever you want a friend, you must promise to come straight to me or the Vicar."

"And if only I could do aught for you, master, in my turn—I should be as proud—as proud as a turkey-cock amongst barn-door fowls. But I'm afraid there's no such luck for me, and I shall have to die in debt."

"Well, Jack, you shall give me that old tobacco-pouch of yours, and you shall take my match-box in exchange."

"No, no, master; it's silver, and a deal too smart for me."

"That's nothing to do with it. I have set my heart on the tobacco-pouch, and I want you to have the match-box, that, as we are both smokers,

each may have something to remind him frequently of the other. You will not refuse me this favour, Jack?"

"There's the pouch, Master Vaughan, and I'll take the box, if you wish it. And before I go, missus, I should like to come up to the Vicarage, and dig out the new flower-beds the parson was talking about."

"We shall be very much obliged to you," answered Mary, "and my father will be delighted to see his plans executed; and we shall always remember you when we look at the flowers, Jack," she added, with her sweet smile.

There was a mixture of pride and pleasure in Jack's eye, as he touched his hat to the young lady. Then he once more shouldered the load of wood, which he had deposited for a moment on the ground, and turned in the direction of the farm.

"Stop a minute, and shake hands, Jack," said Reginald. "I must leave for London to-morrow."

"God bless you, master, wherever you go!" answered Rough, and the labourer wrung the

hand of the gentleman with a grasp of iron. "Something tells me we shall meet again ; but, if not, I shall often think of you, and I wouldn't part with your match-box to save me from starving."

With that he went on his way, whistling a low, plaintive air—one of the negro melodies, which he had picked up from some wandering musician. They watched his tall figure, till it disappeared amongst the trees, and then the lovers returned to the Vicarage together.

"It is not I who am late for dinner this time," said Dr. Goodenough, with a significant smile. "However, I have been busy with this volume of Fulke Greville, Lord Brooke—who was, as he tells us, servant to Queen Elizabeth, counsellor to King James, and friend to Sir Philip Sidney—and the morning has passed pleasantly enough."

"If you had been with us, papa," replied Mary, "I am afraid you would have heard many things that would not have pleased you." And she proceeded to describe the various changes at Aldersleigh.

"There is much to regret in what you tell me,



my love," he answered. " But life is ever subject to such vicissitudes ; and philosophy and religion would be alike at fault if they did not enable us to bear them with equanimity, and only strive to make them fall as lightly as possible on our fellow-creatures. Hear what my book says about it :—

‘The chief use then in man of that he knows  
Is his painstaking for the good of all ;  
Not fleshly weeping for our own made woes,  
Not laughing from a melancholy gall,  
Not hating from a soul that overflows  
With bitterness, breathed out from inward thrall ;  
But sweetly rather to ease, loose, or bind,  
As need requires, this frail, fallen human kind.’ ”

“ That is all very true, I know, papa ; besides being very well expressed. Still, it is difficult to reconcile oneself to the actions of rash and inconsiderate people. I could have cried with vexation when I heard that the old servants were to be turned away.”

“ Crying would not do much good, my dear, and your second thought was the best. We will have a room got ready for Mrs. Sutton, and I will set to work at once to find places for the others.

Good servants of the old school are not so plentiful that I need have any fear of succeeding."

"Are good servants now rare in England?" asked Reginald.

"Much more so than they were," answered the Vicar. "Our restless habits, our luxury, our extravagance, the confusion of ranks and classes, the removal of old landmarks, all tend to loosen the bond between master and servant, and to substitute a mere money contract for the ancient relations of dependence and protection. I suppose it cannot be helped; but I confess I prefer the old notions of a household and a family."

"It is the same in America, or even worse. Do you think we should lay the blame to any particular class?"

"I think it would be unjust to do so. The evil is the result of many causes, which influence alike the employers and the employed. The root of it all lies in our selfishness, irreverence, and unbelief."

"And what is the remedy?"

"Ah, my dear boy! that is a very wide question.

I will answer it satisfactorily on the day when we all cease to pay homage to idols, and go back to the worship of the God of our fathers. At present," he added, with a slight twinkle in his eye, "the religion of the Golden Calf is decidedly in the ascendant."

Then they went to dinner, and the afternoon and evening were spent in talking of various subjects. There was always much to say, before Reginald left for London, and on this occasion he was unable to fix the exact date for his next visit. Mary had been invited to Russell Square; but she did not like quitting her father, just as the recent death of the Squire would have made solitude doubly solitary to him.

"Of course he wants me to go," she said to Reginald. "He never thinks of himself for a single moment. And you know how kind the Stronges are, and how I should enjoy being with them, and near another friend of mine. But it would not be right."

"You are a dear, good girl, Mary," was all that Reginald could answer. "Perhaps, a little later,

you may persuade your father to come with you to town?"

"That *would* be delightful," she replied. "It would be like my first visit to London years ago, when everything was fresh and new, and I was so happy, that it seemed to me an enchanted place. But then my dear mother was with us!"

"Nothing can supply that loss," said Reginald; "yet I will venture to hope, Mary, that my love may have some power to make you feel it less."

She took his hand in hers, and looked up fondly in his face. Then he bent over her, and kissed her; and there was a long, sweet silence between them more eloquent than a thousand words. It was only interrupted by the return of the Vicar to the apartment, with a pile of black-letter volumes, which he had brought out to illustrate some passage in the "Canterbury Tales." The good parson's mind was so full of the poetry five centuries old, that he scarcely noticed the little poem which was acting before his eyes.

The next day Reginald took his departure, and was soon once more hard at work with his law-

books. Excepting George Strong's lively or eccentric sallies, and an occasional visit to Russell Square, the correspondence with Mary was the only interruption to his studies. Her letters informed him of everything that happened at Aldersleigh, and he heard with regret of continued alterations in that neighbourhood.

"Only think," she wrote, soon after his return to London, "what Mr. Sharp has done now. You remember the dear little cottage which Mrs. Graham rented of the old Squire, and where she and Aunt Jane have spent so many happy years, and where they hoped to finish their lives. Well, Mr. Sharp has given them notice to quit, because he wants to pull it down, and build a great, staring villa on the site, which he means to let for five or six times the money. He tried to get them out at once, but papa knew better than that, and has forced him to give them proper notice, so that they need not leave till six months from next Michaelmas. But I am so sorry about it altogether. It will be such a grief to them, and to poor Arthur in India."

Many similar pieces of intelligence were contained in subsequent letters, and the writer, though habitually cheerful, was evidently depressed in spirits by the news she had to communicate. Reginald was vexed also, but he tried to comfort her by adopting a less serious tone.

"I shall hardly know my own bright little Mary," he wrote, "if she goes on much longer in this doleful strain. *What can't be cured must be endured* is a very wise proverb, and as you and I are not masters of Aldersleigh, and have no power to influence the arrangements there, it would be foolish to fret over what is quite beyond our control. But, having begun with proverbs, we will console ourselves with another. *New brooms sweep clean* is a very old and true saying; and I should not be surprised, if, after a short time, when the new energy has exhausted itself, matters should settle down to some extent in the old way. Besides, Mr. Higgins may prove less exacting than his agent, and public opinion (if nothing else) may induce him to listen to reason. At all events, dearest, I would entreat

you to cherish your own hopeful and happy nature, and not to let these annoyances banish one gleam of sunshine from your heart."

His wish was granted, for the next letter was all sunshine from first to last. "I am so happy," it said, "so absurdly, childishly happy! Can you not guess why, dearest? Mr. Crosby is coming down to take papa's duty for a fortnight, and we shall be in London on Monday. How I long to be there! I wonder if any one we know will meet us at the station!"

## CHAPTER XIX.

## NEW LIGHTS.

OF course there was a happy meeting at the station, and then came the merry drive through the streets, and a pleasant evening in Russell Square. The young people were once more in excellent spirits, and the elders felt as only old friends who have known each other from boyhood feel, when again united under the same roof. Mrs. Strong was all motherly kindness and hospitality; the girls could not make enough of Mary; and even George, who strolled in after dinner, endeavoured to amuse her in his own peculiar fashion.

"I am sorry I could not be earlier, Miss Good-enough," he said, "to receive you on your first



arrival; but really, when a man has all the work to do at chambers, and his colleague indulges in nothing but dissipation, what are you to expect from a poor fellow?"

"Never mind what he says, Mary," cried Charlotte, laughing. "I believe Mr. Vaughan does more in a day than George does in a month. At least, we never hear of his labours except from himself."

"Excuse me, my dear cousin; that only shows how little I am appreciated. It is true I have no time to go about shopping with young ladies in the morning, or to meet them at railway stations, like Reginald there. If I did so I should have their good word in my favour. As it is I can only look to the testimony of my own conscience."

"You shall have my good word, George," said Reginald, "to this extent—that you are a much better, kinder, and more sensible fellow than strangers might sometimes judge from your conversation."

He spoke with friendly warmth, and Charlotte looked pleased and grateful. But George only

made him a bow, and expressed himself deeply indebted for "so very negative a compliment."

In spite of George's odd ways, however, or perhaps in part because of them, they soon became all very intimate, and the talk and laughter went merrily on. Mary and Reginald were quite different people from the Stronges; but they had youth, and health, and kind hearts in common, and they liked one another, and wished to please—and so the first evening in London was altogether a very cheerful one.

On the following days they went about *seeing sights*, and enjoyed them as young people do when in good humour with themselves and others. It was now near the height of the season, and London was very full. It was moreover an exciting time, for Mr. Gladstone had brought in his Reform Bill, and there was great agitation in political circles. The gentlemen who had played with the question, as a mere badge of the Liberal party, and a convenient cry for the hustings, began to think that matters were growing serious, and might go farther than they either expected

or desired. So, night after night, there was consternation in parliament, and Mr. Lowe lifted up his voice in Cassandra-like prophecies, which met with the usual fate of such warnings. And thus commenced for England a new period of change, of which we, who saw the beginning, are unable even to guess the end.

But the lovers and their friends did not trouble themselves much about politics. They were occupied with the pleasures of the passing hour, and happy in each other's society. They visited in turn the principal places of amusement, and the time went so rapidly, that the first week was over before they knew it.

One day, Dr. Goodenough was walking in the Park with Mary and Reginald. Mr. Strong was at his office, and Mrs. Strong and her daughters had gone to pay a visit to some acquaintances newly arrived in town. It was the gayest hour of the afternoon, and the drive was crowded with splendid horses and carriages. As they watched the long line of equipages, with their freight of handsome women and high-bred men, they were

startled by the sound of a voice close beside them.

"Bless me, if it isn't the parson from Aldersleigh! And Mr. Vaughan too, by jingo! Glad to see you in town, gentlemen. And this young lady is your daughter, Dr. Goodenough?"

"Yes, Mr. Higgins; my only daughter. We are come, like other rustics, to take a peep at the beauty and fashion of London."

"Oh, hang the beauty and fashion! Give me the wealth, say I! There's a pretty lot of capital sunk in the scene before us. I've left my own carriage yonder, and got out to walk. That confounded House of Commons is enough to bring on apoplexy, unless one takes a little regular exercise."

"From the patriotic sentiments I have heard you express," said Reginald, "I should think, Mr. Higgins, no sacrifice would be too great for your country."

"Not so sure of that, Mr. Vaughan. What has my country done for me? But, of course, a public man must pay for his whistle, and the

House is no sinecure, I can tell you. Would you like to hear a debate, Miss Goodenough?"

"Very much, indeed," said Mary, in all sincerity.

"Well, some night, if you are stopping in town, I may manage to get you a seat behind the gratings. We have a cage for ladies, you know, where they can do no mischief, and only hear us talk. Meantime, you must all come and dine with me."

There was something good-natured and friendly in this, which the Vicar did not like to repel ungraciously; but he would much rather have escaped the invitation, and he now sought for some civil mode of declining it.

"We are staying with friends ——," he began.

"I shall take no excuse," interrupted Mr. Higgins. "I belong to your parish now, you know, and I want to talk to you about Aldersleigh, and a thousand other things. And as for you, Mr. Vaughan, if you don't come I shall think you owe me a grudge about the estate. Wednesday's our day from the House, and I always give a grand

spread once a week. So, next Wednesday, if you please, at half-past seven *sharp*; and I flatter myself you'll meet some distinguished characters at my table."

Dr. Goodenough still hesitated, but in the end Mr. Higgins had his way. If only for the sake of his poor parishioners, the Vicar had reasons for wishing to remain on fair terms with the new Squire of Aldersleigh; and Reginald thought it would look churlish to decline the hospitality of a man who had in some sort been his rival for the possession of property. As for Mary, she was quite satisfied to go wherever her father and lover went.

"I wish you joy of your visit," said Mr. Strong, when he heard of it; "but Frank Goodenough could never say *no* to a civil speech, and was always afraid of hurting somebody's feelings. I should as soon think of dining with the hippopotamus as with that fellow."

On the appointed Wednesday our friends proceeded to one of the finest terraces in the neighbourhood of Kensington, and stopping before a

house that rose, Babel-like, to the skies, were ushered into a hall and up a staircase, brilliant with flowers and crowded with servants. They were received by Mr. Higgins, magnificent in diamond studs and embroidered shirt-front, and introduced by him to his wife, a florid lady all sparkling with jewels, and her sister, a younger woman in what appeared to be a classical costume.

"You've heard of Miss Jay, my sister-in-law," said Mr. Higgins; "a most remarkable person!"

Dr. Goodenough, having never heard of her, could only bow in reply.

"I'm glad to make your acquaintance, I'm sure, Miss Goodenough," said Mrs. Higgins; "and when I go down to Aldersleigh I shall want you to help me about the schools and many things. I suppose they were sadly neglected in the old Squire's time; but we shall put them on quite a different footing."

"Our schools have been thought very good ones," said Mary, modestly; "and my father always looked after them himself."

"Ah, my dear Miss Goodenough! there's the difficulty. Too much of the clerical element you see. We are all for unsectarian education—are we not, Arabella?"

Miss Jay looked at her sister as though she scarcely deigned to notice the question. Then, turning languidly to Mary, she clasped her hands and murmured: "We are all for the Good, the True, the Beautiful!"

"Education is the great want of the age," continued Mrs. Higgins, addressing a group of gentlemen near her. "But we must eliminate all extraneous matter from the *curriculum*, as I heard a gifted lecturer eloquently express it. I don't pretend to understand Arabella's views on the subject, you know. We must wait till her book comes out to be enlightened on many points."

"You do *not* understand my views, sister," said Miss Jay, with an air of pity. "How should you?"

This agreeable conversation was interrupted by the announcement of dinner, and the company streamed down into a large and lofty room, which



was actually dazzling with the profusion of plate and glass, flowers and lights. There was every sign of boundless wealth, displayed in the most lavish and ostentatious form ; but the glare was too great for comfort, and the guests too numerous for any general intercourse. The party soon split, as such parties do, into little independent groups, only recalled from time to time to a sense of the presence of their host by the sound of his loud voice pealing from the bottom of the table.

"I tell you, Bobbins," he shouted, to another member of parliament at the further extremity of the board, "we shall stand no nonsense from the Chancellor of the Exchequer. If he's to lead us Liberals, he must give us none of his Oxford airs. It's a good dog that barks when it's told ; and if he's to be our dog, he must come to our whistle."

"To be sure," said Bobbins, who was somewhat of a wag in his way. "Pitts and Peels were all very well in the dark ages, when the coachman had to drive the team. But now we are all in the train together, and only want a fellow just to keep the engine on the line."

"That's it," cried Higgins. "I pay my cook a very high figure, and I hope you all like your dinner. But I don't let my cook dictate to me. And I pay the leader of my party with office, and patronage, and his quarter's salary. But then he must do my work, and not attempt to be my master."

With much more to the same effect ; all tending to show, that genius, eloquence, and statesmanship, which were once supposed to sway the destinies of nations, are now merely useful tools for the benefit of the Higginses of faction.

"It seems to me," said Reginald to Miss Jay, who was seated near him, "that this theory of public rights and duties would not be very encouraging to a young statesman."

"I never meddle with ordinary politics," answered the lady. "They are quite below my sphere. I may see, and hear, and deplore ; but nothing can be done, while the finer affinities of life are subject to the rude hand of man."

"Excuse me," said Reginald, "if I do not exactly understand you."

"No! I do not expect to be understood. Not by your sex, certainly; and my own has been too systematically dwarfed and stunted in its growth, to rise to the level of my philosophy. There is my poor sister for example. She thinks she knows something. Words only, I assure you. Nothing but words, words, words!"

"Well, Miss Jay," said a gentleman, who was seated on the other side of her, "words have played a great part in the history of mankind, and I find people constantly using them, without any corresponding ideas. If I see the title of a new book, for instance, I never suppose it has the slightest reference to the contents."

"I would have my book like a flower," said the lady, "complete in all its parts. But whenever it appears, Mr. Prig, I am well aware that you will tear it to pieces."

"Why should you suspect me of such intentions? People judge harshly of us reviewers, and seem to think it is a pleasure to slaughter the innocents. I assure you we are even as other men."

"As other *men*, it may be," said Miss Jay, with

a meaning smile. "Tyrants and usurpers everywhere, you are not likely to spare the tender blossoms of literature. And how can it be otherwise? You have no sense of the Good, the True, the Beautiful!"

"That is our misfortune," said Mr. Prig, "especially as some of us have a keen sense of the ridiculous. But, being such coarse creatures, we can only make the best of our opportunities."

The speaker was a shrewd, intelligent-looking man, with a slight sneer in his tone, and a touch of superciliousness in the curve of his lip. He was a well-known contributor to one of the weekly reviews, and was feared and flattered in most of the companies he frequented. But he had the manners of good society, could talk well on most subjects, and probably preferred meeting people who showed that they were not afraid of him. So, after listening for a time to Miss Jay's exposition of the rights and the wrongs of woman, and disposing of her philosophy by the help of some quiet banter, he addressed himself chiefly to Reginald,

and was soon engaged in animated conversation. Europe, America, art, literature, politics—all seemed familiar to him, and were treated in turn with considerable power and effect. But what struck Reginald most was the absence of all serious conviction, and the affectation of superior knowledge in everything. He seemed to look on the world as a game of chess, of which he understood all the combinations, and watched the moves with a sublime and contemptuous indifference. He could tell when the game was played well or ill, and which side was likely to win, and which to lose—but as for such common words as right and wrong, truth and falsehood, they seemed to have no place in his vocabulary. From the heights of his Olympus he could look down with equal pity on gods and men, and describe their motives and actions according to the humour of the moment, sometimes with a wit that was amusing, and sometimes with a cynicism that was revolting. The general impression left on the mind of Reginald by his talk was that of a clever and brilliant insincerity.

Meanwhile, Mary had been seated between two young men, of very different aspect from each other. The one was a fair, comely, clean-looking youth, fresh from Cambridge—the other an atrabilarious poet, with sallow cheeks, black elflocks, and sullen brow. The poet swallowed his dinner in gloomy silence, but the Cantab was ready to talk to any one. He soon found out that Mary was a comparative stranger in London.

“But I suppose you have seen most of the sights already?” he asked.

“I have seen a great deal in little more than a week,” she answered, “but it would take much longer to exhaust the sights of London. However, what I most care about is not likely to run away. I put Westminster Abbey first of all.”

“It is a grand old building, certainly—for an age of ignorance and superstition.”

“For any age, I should think. But there is one sight I should like to have seen more than all; and that is the Queen.”

“It is curious,” said the Cantab, with the air of a person who rather wishes to astonish his auditor,

"how long the irrational sentiment of loyalty retains its hold!"

"Irrational!" exclaimed Mary, with undisguised wonder in her candid face. "I have always heard it described as the virtue of a true patriot."

"It had its uses in former days, no doubt. But you see, we are fast outgrowing the delusions of childhood. I do not believe now, if I have my tooth drawn, that a fairy will put sixpence in my shoe. And we none of us believe that kings and queens are like those in the story-books, who always wore their crowns, and talked and acted so much more grandly than other people."

"Perhaps not," said Mary, laughing; "but a queen that does not always wear her crown may deserve the love and respect of all her subjects."

"Of course, she may be the most estimable of women. I am speaking only of the office. It is nothing but a symbol, which has almost lost its meaning."

"But to me it is a most sacred and venerable symbol. I do not know how to explain myself, but all our English history, all our English life seems

to me coloured by it. If a girl can feel this, a man ought to feel it much more."

"I can see no *ought* in the matter. There are many things in our history which have lost their meaning. We used to believe in ghosts, and burn witches. We laugh at them now. One by one, we have made a great many changes, and I think we are about to make a great many more. We shall begin by getting a *real* House of Commons, not a *sham*, and when the whole nation is represented in parliament, it will not let any foolish prejudices stand in its way. First, the Church will have to put its house in order; then, the Lords may probably get a hint to go about their business; and as for the Crown. . . ."

"Now really you are talking treason!"

"That is another old-fashioned prejudice. I respect Her Majesty, and would fight for her if necessary, as long as she is the chief magistrate of the realm. In fact, I am one of her Volunteers. But that does not prevent my saying that I think the days of Royalty are numbered."

"Are you a Republican then?"



"I have no prepossessions on the subject. If England became a Republic, I should be a Republican—just as if I went to America, or to Russia, I should accept the institutions of the country."

"I cannot think you are serious," said Mary. "An Englishman must have some *feeling* about such things."

"You would not have him sacrifice the good of the country for a feeling?"

"I cannot argue with you, but I know very well what I mean. It is because I think the good of the country bound up with such feelings, that I would stand by them, and defend them to the last, and, if I were a man, fight for them till I died!"

She looked very pretty, with the fire of patriotic excitement in her blue eyes, and the young Cantab glanced at her, half amused, and half admiring. But the poet, who had just finished eating, fastened on her a more unwholesome gaze. There was something of the leer of the Satyr in it, and, when he began to talk, his conversation was in character with the gross animalism of his countenance. Not that Mary understood a word of it,

for it was veiled (as he would have said himself) *in the exquisite forms of Grecian art*; but she felt instinctively, that there was something unusual and indecorous in his style and manner, and she was beginning to get very uncomfortable, when the young Cambridge man (who, with all his faults, was a gentleman) cut the poet short in so stern and peremptory a fashion, that the latter was forced to gulp down his amorous and choleric emotions as best he might. After this, Mary turned away from the poet, and conversed exclusively with her other neighbour, till the moment came when she could make her escape to the drawing-room.

The Vicar's place had been near the head of the table, in a blaze of intellectual light, emitted by Mrs. Higgins and her more illustrious guests. There was the great Bobbins, gigantic mill-owner, and facetious member of parliament; and Professor Positive, one of the most distinguished men of our time, as the hostess informed Dr. Goodenough in a stage-whisper; and Mr. Crotchet, who had his own special panacea for every human ill; and

Mr. Maudlin, whose philanthropy seemed more alive to the woes of criminals than to those of honest people; and Mr. Cosmopolite, whose sympathies were so widely diffused over foreign countries, that he had none left for his own. All these gentlemen had their favourite theories, their pet projects, their peculiar modes of thought, which they were quite willing to inflict on their audience, to the exclusion of every other topic; but fortunately their wives and daughters were not of the same mind. It was soon apparent, that the women could talk like ordinary mortals; the matrons enlarged on the faults of their servants and the maladies of their children (fruitful themes!) with as much unction as though they had never heard of training-schools or systems of drainage; and the young ladies seemed to prefer the opera and the last new novel to the regeneration of the world by the extension of the co-operative principle. Of course, they found some of the younger men both able and willing to converse with them. A cotton-broker from Liverpool was eloquent on fashionable life in London, and a Jew from the

Stock Exchange expatiated on horses and boat-races like any muscular Christian.

The peace of this singular Noah's Ark was suddenly broken by a violent irruption. Eager for dessert, the children of the house came rushing from the nursery, in all the glory of velvet tunics and knickerbockers, lace frocks and silken sashes. They were little models of their father, with chubby cheeks and red hair, but they could not be said to do credit to their mother's great scheme of education; for they spilled the wine, broke the glasses, tore the ladies' dresses, pulled crackers in people's faces, and fought for cakes and sweet-meats like children who have no such advantages.

"I fear," muttered Mr. Prig, "that the great scheme does not include a birch-rod in its appliances!"

"It is indeed a lamentable scene," said Miss Jay, with sisterly feeling: "but what can you expect, if children are not trained from the first to a sense of the Good, the True, the Beautiful?"

At length, both ladies and children made their retreat together, and the philosophers were left in

possession of the field. It is true that Mr. Higgins tried to amuse his guests with an account of the high prices he had paid for his wines, and that Mr. Bobbins ventured on a few club-jokes, and stories of the House of Commons; but, on the whole, the heavier metal had it all its own way. Mr. Crotchet dilated on his last new plan for pacifying Ireland, by taking away everybody's property, and giving it to somebody else; Mr. Maudlin was eloquent on the abolition of the punishment of death, in every case except that of a colonial governor; and Mr. Cosmopolite showed the expediency of a general war, for the purpose of promoting the interests of universal peace. But when each of these had discharged his artillery in turn, the great Professor Positive opened fire with his ponderous cannon, and every other sound was effectually silenced by the roar.

As there was a clergyman present, the Professor of course addressed himself especially to him, with that sort of patronising pity, which is so characteristic of a superior mind. He could evidently make allowances for the prejudices of education,

and concede something to the necessities of a man's social position. But such concessions must not be carried too far. It would not do to admit even the possibility of errors, which had been overthrown for ever by the inexorable logic of facts. There could be no compromise with regard to fundamental truths.

After this exordium, it was rather startling to be told, that all existing religious beliefs, and all so-called metaphysical opinions, were equally void and valueless. Mankind had formerly been influenced by such notions, but they were now all doomed to perish in the natural evolution of ideas. Moses, and Plato, and St. Paul, and fifty others, may have been clever people enough in a certain sense; but they were all misled by a vicious system of philosophy, and it was reserved for AUGUSTE COMTE to discover the true basis of human knowledge. He saw, that nothing can be known but *phenomena*, and the invariable order in which they succeed each other. After this grand discovery, all knowledge reduces itself to *physical science*, and it is idle to speculate on any

existence beyond the bounds of the visible universe. The age of theology, the age of metaphysics, both have passed away with all their delusions. The age of *Positivism* alone remains, with its promise of future progress and happiness for the world.

Dr. Goodenough modestly suggested, that, some years before the birth of Monsieur Comte, there had been a certain Lord Bacon, who was thought to have pointed out the true method of studying the physical sciences—a method, which had been followed with some success in this and other countries—and who saw nothing incompatible in such views with the highest religious faith. But before he could finish his sentence the Professor fell upon him with a storm of contemptuous invective. Lord Bacon indeed! If they were to go back to old-fashioned names like that, they had better quote the Gospels at once! Lord Bacon, who said he would rather believe all the fables in the Talmud and the Alcoran than that this universal frame is without a mind! There was a pretty authority for a philosopher!

The Vicar did not choose to continue the dis-

cussion in this tone, and was satisfied to repeat to himself: "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God." But Reginald, who resented the attack on his old friend, was determined to have another word with the Professor.

"I presume," he said, "that if facts alone are to be our guides, we are bound to consider *all* facts. Now none can be better established than the existence in human nature of a religious instinct, or faculty, or whatever else you please to call it. How do you provide for this in your new philosophy?"

"It is a pertinent question," replied the Professor, condescendingly; "but the difficulty did not escape the great mind of Auguste Comte. He has left us a religion complete in all its parts. For the old superstitions of a Supreme Being, and the Immortality of the Soul, he has substituted the glorious Religion of Humanity. Man, the perfection of life, can alone be the object of worship; and every man must select for himself his particular deities, in the guardian angels of his family—the mother, the wife, the daughter. But, for public



worship, collective humanity may be embodied in a symbol—a beautiful woman of thirty, holding her son in her arms. Then we shall have our sacraments, marking the different periods of human life—Presentation, Initiation, Admission, Destination, Marriage, Maturity, Retirement, Transformation, and Incorporation; and our priesthood, composed of the leaders in science and philosophy; and our temples, all turned towards Paris, the true Mecca and Jerusalem of the modern world. And we shall have our festivals, and our sacred processions—our banners, white on one side, and green on the other——”

“I should think *green* a very appropriate colour,” said Mr. Prig; “but, as we have been summoned to the drawing-room, it might perhaps be as well to wake our host.”

Mr. Higgins and Mr. Bobbins had long ago fallen asleep over their wine; the poet was composing an ode to Venus, and the cotton-broker and the gentleman from the Stock Exchange were making up a little betting-book in the corner; but the rest of the company seemed to have had quite

enough of Positivism, and Mr. Prig's diversion met with the general approval. There was a sudden pushing back of chairs, followed by a rapid movement towards the door, and the Professor, having vainly attempted to stem the torrent, was himself carried away with it, and obliged to continue his discourse on the staircase.

## CHAPTER XX.

## MR. STRONG'S OPINIONS.

"HOW did you like your dinner-party, my dear?" asked Mr. Strong of Mary, the next morning at breakfast, where Reginald had already made his appearance with the rest.

"I have never before seen anything so grand," answered Mary. "Such plate, such glass, and such beautiful flowers! I think it was all very well for once. But I should not care about going to another."

"Then the company was inferior to the dinner?"

"Well, I think it was; but even the most agreeable society could hardly have been appreciated.

Only fancy some two dozen people sitting down to dinner together!"

"An absurdity, of course; except in a public hall. The rational number is six or eight, and a dozen just reaches the limits of endurance. But what are the kind of people who flock to the table of Mr. Higgins?"

Then all three related their experiences of the night before, and Mr. Strong listened with a grim, sarcastic chuckle.

"I told you how it would be, Goodenough," he said; "such a fat carcass as Mr. Higgins was sure to gather together all the birds of prey. So Young Cambridge was too radical for your taste, Mary?"

"I do not believe he was half in earnest," she answered; "and if I had known him better, I should have laughed at him for his affectation. I liked him well enough for that."

"But you did not like the poet, you say?"

"Oh, no! I could not bear him. He reminded me of one of the monkeys we saw at the Zoological Gardens. His conversation was quite above my comprehension."

"Or below it," growled Mr. Strong.

"Well, I did not understand it at all, but I suppose it was very classical; only, there was something in his look and manner which made me fancy—perhaps I was mistaken—that he meant to be rude to me."

"Rude to you!" cried Reginald, the blood rushing to his face. "I only wish I had heard him!"

"I wish you had with all my heart!" said Strong.

"It was perhaps as well not," interposed the Vicar; "especially as they were on opposite sides of the table."

"And trust me, Mr. Vaughan," said Charlotte, archly, "you may always leave us girls to take care of ourselves. We can put down impertinence much better than you can, and with half the fuss and confusion."

"That is all very well in a room full of company," said Emma, "but if I were to meet your ill-favoured poet on a moor, I should like to have Mr. Vaughan or some other gentleman within call."

"Or a bull-dog," said Charlotte, "or a stout farmer with a horsewhip."

"How can you talk so, my dear?" cried Mrs. Strong, from behind the steaming urn. "Bull-dogs and horsewhips! Mary will be quite shocked at such unladylike remarks."

"You don't know Mary as well as we do, mamma. Demure as she looks, she has plenty of spirit of her own. Hasn't she, Emma?"

"Yes, to be sure! a terrible little shrew. I wonder you never found her out before, mamma."

"I am surprised at you, Emma," began Mrs Strong; "I always thought. . . ."

"Never mind their nonsense, my dear," interrupted her husband. "If I stop away from business, would you all like to go to the Crystal Palace to-day?"

The proposal met with universal assent, and the breakfast was soon brought to a close, that the ladies might prepare for the excursion.

"I shall not give you more than an hour to put on your bonnets," said Mr. Strong.

When the gentlemen were left by themselves,

the conversation reverted to the dinner of the previous evening.

"I was certainly astonished," said Dr. Good-enough, "to find such a set of wild, extravagant notions put forward in general society. I have been so long a recluse that these things are quite new to me."

"My dear friend," answered Strong, "in our day you must be astonished at nothing. In the first place, all the old restraints are gone—all respect for social usages, and proprieties, and the feelings of others—and every fool speaketh according to his folly. But that is the least part of the evil. There can be no doubt that opinions are abroad, subversive of every principle hitherto recognised in religion or morals, and directly tending to a great revolution in politics. All that was once taken for granted is now called in question, and nothing is too high for censure, too sacred for criticism. It is true, that the new opinions are altogether confused, contradictory, chaotic—but although they have no power to build up anything, they may yet be very mis-

chievous in the work of destruction. I confess, Goodenough, when I think of this Church and State, and of all the glorious history that has made them what they are, I can scarcely speak with patience of the miserable vermin that are banded together to sap the foundations of them both."

"But surely, my dear Strong, you do not mean to include all the people we met last night in one category. They differ so widely amongst themselves."

"Of course they differ, as owls differ from vultures—but they are all birds of rapine. Some may be silly fellows, who spout revolutionary trash just to frighten girls and women. And some may be impudent blackguards, like the poet you describe, with whom there is but one mode of dealing—your fingers in the nape of their necks, and the toe of your boot in their nether garments. And some may be really able men like Prig, with a constant sneer upon their lips, and universal scepticism in their hearts. And some may be shallow theorists, like Crotchet, or Maudlin, or



Cosmopolite. And some again may be absolutely mad with conceit, like Positive and all his school. But they have this at least in common—that they have no reverence for anything beyond their own views, their own fancies, their own little circle of followers and admirers. And yet they are all members of that famous Liberal Party, which has undertaken to reform the old Constitution of England.”

“ But you must not class all Liberals together, my dear Strong. You have known me long enough to feel convinced, that I shall never bear any resemblance to Mr. Crotchet or Professor Positive.”

“ Undoubtedly, my dear friend. It is just because I have always known you to be a Christian minister and an English gentleman, that you would seem to me so out of place in a confederacy of atheists and revolutionists. We have differed in politics all our lives. You have been a Whig, and I a Tory, and I have said harsh things in my time of your friends and principles. But do me the justice to believe, that I have never confounded the great historic party, to which you belonged,

with the motley rabble which now calls itself by the name of Liberal. And it seems to me impossible, that one party should contain a man like you, and a fellow like this apostle of Positivism, for instance—a fellow that would substitute the dreams of a crazy Frenchman, who came out of a lunatic asylum to impose a tissue of blasphemous rubbish on the world, for all our Christian, for all our English traditions. And he is but an extreme example of a wide-spread heresy, which finds its supporters in the press, in the lecture-room, and in society, and which will soon make itself felt on the hustings and in parliament.”

“I cannot believe it,” said Dr. Goodenough. “A few vain or eccentric persons, a few madmen, a few fanatics, may be found here and there to adopt these views. But they are too foreign to all our habits, too purely exotic, ever to take root in England. We are practical, even in our follies. Mere speculative absurdity has never had any chance amongst us.”

“I agree with you, that, left to themselves, the philosophers could do nothing. They claim to be

the lights of the world, but their illumination is a very dim one; and they would soon go out with an unsavoury odour, like wretched tallow-candles as they are, if the flame were not fed by other influences. It is their alliance with the rebellious, democratic spirit of the age, which makes the danger. They are united in one league with all the vague discontent, all the restless longing for change, which springs from disappointed ambition, in a time of great luxury, and great inequality of fortune; and they make use of wealthy fools like Mr. Higgins, whose vanity and love of ostentation are more powerful even than their selfishness. But all this would be of little moment, were it not for the support they receive from the state of political parties. The old questions are settled, and public men, no longer divided by real differences of opinion, are engaged more and more in the ignoble struggle for place. Hence the hollowness, the insincerity, the false professions, the casting about for factious watchwords and popular cries. And hence that portentous apparition, the new Liberal Party—combining men of birth, and

station, and character, with the enemies of all law, all order, all decency, and all religion."

"Come, come, you exaggerate," said the Vicar, smiling. "You were always for laying the colours on thick, you know. Such a party as you have painted could never have any weight in England, except by suppressing all its more dangerous elements. You cannot suppose that our public men would play into the hands of mere destructives, or that noblemen and gentlemen of fortune, loyal subjects of the Queen, would allow a set of adventurers to lead them to their own ruin and that of their sovereign."

"Do not be too sure of that," answered Strong. "They would not be the first aristocracy which has rushed blindly on its fate. And many things may conspire to bring about the catastrophe. Death has been busy of late years amongst the leaders of your party—the old constitutional Whigs, whom I did not love, but for whom I had a certain respect. And should their place be filled by a man of undoubted genius—a man of great gifts and rare endowments—but unstable as

water in his opinions, the child of impulse, easily swayed by passion, and incapable of moderation or self-restraint—who can tell to what extremes he may lead or follow his adherents? The cloud, which is now no bigger than a man's hand, may swell into a storm that will shake every institution in the country. We begin with this mob-agitation for a reform in parliament. The next step will be an attack upon the Church. Then will come questions about taxation, questions about the land, questions about the right of succession to property—and, with them, the House of Lords may fall—and *then*, how many years' purchase will you give for the Crown?"

"All this, my dear Strong, is exaggeration. In 1832, we were threatened with consequences equally alarming, but the good sense and loyalty of the country brought us safely through."

"Yes; but, in 1832, good sense and loyalty were not afraid to speak out, and to say to the revolutionary wave: *Thus far shalt thou go, and no farther*. Now, instead of meeting our enemies in the gate, and taking them manfully by the

throat, we are all trying to escape responsibility. The demagogues and destructives are active enough, and so are all the tag, rag, and bobtail of politics. It is the decent people who seem to have lost the power of resistance. They go to their clubs and dinner-parties, and enjoy their comforts and luxuries, and shake their heads or shrug their shoulders at what is passing around them ; but how many of them would make the least sacrifice for what they call their principles ? In fact, much of their conversation shows how loosely those principles are held. Men, who profess loyalty to their Sovereign, are not ashamed to repeat every silly, scandalous lie that infamous scoundrels may propagate with regard to any member of the Royal Family. Men, who call themselves Churchmen, never miss an opportunity of sneering at bishops and clergy, and appear to enjoy the divisions and difficulties which every true Christian must deplore. And men, who pretend to be attached to the Constitution, are never weary of pointing out its anomalies, and disparaging its advantages. And along with all

this laxity of opinion, how many there are, who hold no opinions at all! who are too lazy, or too indifferent, or too much absorbed in little, peddling affairs of their own, to give a single thought to matters of public interest! And if this should turn out to be true of the main body of the Middle Classes, where are we to look for the spirit or the patriotism to preserve us from revolution?"

"Judging from the example of America," said Reginald, who had not hitherto spoken, "I should think there is another danger. It seems to be one of the incidents of a democracy, that the more enlightened minds should keep aloof from public affairs. Men, who are neither ignorant nor indifferent, and whose influence would be of the highest value, cannot descend to the low arts required to gain the support of mobs, and therefore take no part at all in the government of the country. The great founders of the Republic—Washington, Hamilton, and the rest—saw the danger, but hoped it might be combated and overcome. They trusted that sense and courage must hold their own in the long run, and could not bring them-

selves to believe that wise men could be silenced by fools, and brave men cowed by bullies. Yet such, alas! has been the case. Exactly in proportion as the institutions have become more democratic—more popular, in the widest sense of the word—have the best intellects in the nation had less and less to do with them. I do not justify this; I do not even attempt to explain it. I am merely stating a fact.”

“Of course, it is so,” said Strong, emphatically; “we see it already in our large cities and boroughs. If we have to depend on your enlightened middle classes, Goodenough, I fear we shall only lean on a broken reed. There remain the hereditary leaders, and notably the Great Houses. These are still a power in the State, and might do something, if they were not bent on their own destruction. But instead of uniting, as they ought to do, in defence of all that is left of ancient authority, you will see them playing their stupid game of faction—bidding against each other at the popular auction—and parting with every security devised by their ancestors, in the vain hope of conciliating



the philosophers and the mob. And so they will go on, I suppose, till a Committee of Public Safety is sitting at Westminster, to make out a list of the *suspected*, and a roving commission traversing the country, to assess the value of their estates."

"And then for the *guillotine en permanence*—eh, Strong?" cried the Vicar, laughing. "No, no; you will not frighten us with the bugbear of a French Revolution. We are all Englishmen, and as little inclined to Jacobinism as our fathers were. Our worst follies will never take that direction."

"A halter will do as well as a guillotine," said Strong; "but, seriously, I am not disposed to wait for either alternative. I would make a stand, whilst there is something besides our own necks to fight for. If a struggle must come, let it be in defence of the Church and the Queen's Crown."

"And do you really think, my dear Strong, that you and your party would be left alone in the struggle? If ever that day should dawn, you, and I, and every honest man in England, will all be of ONE PARTY. Between order and anarchy, loyalty and

treason, religion and atheism, depend upon it there will not be a moment's hesitation. Even I, old, and fat, and peaceable as I am, could strike a good stroke in such a cause."

"That's the most sensible word you have spoken yet, my dear friend, and I almost wish the day *were* come, and you and I marching together against the rabble rout. We would scatter the whole host of ragamuffins like chaff before the wind. But here are the ladies, who have actually put on their bonnets within the allotted time. So a truce to politics; and now for the Crystal Palace!"

## CHAPTER XXI.

## RIVAL POWERS.

A FEW days after the Vicar and Mary had left town, Reginald was once more busily engaged with his books, when he received the following letter:—

“ONURED SIR,

“I tak up my pen to let you no I am wel and also have got work in the Blak Cuntry. I have got work at making bricks, which is not ard to do, and no man need turn his back on. The wages is not igh, but I can ern more then sum, becos I work by the job and don't let the gras gro under my feet. Sum of the chaps ere think I

do more than enuf, but I dont mind there chaf. They want me to jine there Union, but I was always used to work wen I like, how I like, and for wat master I like, and I dont see wy a groan man shuld mak himself a grate baby, and wors then a negro slave to other chaps no wiser then he is. Wen work's done, I sit down to smok my pipe, and wen I luke at the silver box you gave me for a kipsake, I think of all you've don for me, and wish I culd see you agen. Hopping you and Miss Mary and the parson and all frends is wel, I pray God to bles you all. I mov about the cuntry, but may always be erd on at Mister Pott's, at the Brickleer's House of Call at Woollerrampton. If you rite me a letter, pleas send it to that a dress.

“So no mor at present from

“Your loving servant,

“JACK ROUGH.”

To this letter, evidently written with great pains and trouble, Reginald was not long in sending a reply as follows:—

“DEAR JACK,

“It gave me much pleasure to hear you were well and at work again; only take care not to bring back the fever by working in wet clay. I think you are quite right to keep clear of the Unions, which seem to me (as at present managed) to be inventions for reducing all men to the same level, and preventing the careful and industrious from gaining any advantage over the worthless and lazy—thus reversing the laws of nature, which are, in fact, the laws of God. I too am hard at work, with books instead of bricks, and I do not suppose it matters what are the implements of our trade, so long as we do our duty in that state of life to which we are called. But I have had some holidays of late; for the Vicar and his daughter have been in London, and of course we were a great deal together. We did not forget you, Jack, but talked of you several times, and Miss Mary was very anxious to know what had become of you. I shall take care to send her the contents of your letter. You cannot wish more sincerely than I do, that we may one day meet again, for I

always remember with pleasure the time we spent in each other's company. Your tobacco-pouch is now on the table before me, and I never go anywhere without it. Let me know if there is any chance of your coming to London ; and be sure to keep me informed, if you leave Staffordshire, in what part of the country you are to be found. I shall always be glad to hear from you, when you are able to write ; and with warmest wishes for your health and happiness,

“ I remain, my dear Jack,

“ Your sincere friend,

“ REGINALD VAUGHAN.”

The correspondence with Rough, however, did not continue, as writing was too much of a task for the honest labourer, to be attempted except on very rare occasions. But the interchange of letters between the Temple and the Vicarage was regular and constant. Throughout that eventful summer, when Austria and Prussia were contending for supremacy in Germany, and the railings of Hyde Park fell before the assault of a lawless mob

at home, Reginald kept Mary informed of every passing event of interest, and she in her turn told him of all her thoughts, feelings, and studies, and of all the various changes in the neighbourhood of Aldersleigh. In the course of the autumn, her two friends, Charlotte and Emma Strong, came down on a visit to the Vicarage—not long after the time when Mr. and Mrs. Higgins, released from parliamentary duties and the toils of the London season, took possession of the old mansion in Worcestershire, and resolved to astonish the county by the display of their wealth and magnificence.

They certainly did succeed in creating a good deal of astonishment, though not always of an admiring kind. Their ridiculous pretence and ostentation, the tasteless and offensive obtrusion of their riches in every possible form, the patronizing airs they showed to their humbler neighbours, and their awkward attempts at familiarity with persons of established rank, at first caused some amusement, and soon began to provoke disgust. Of course, a member of parliament, who had succeeded

to an old estate, and who had moreover the reputation of being a *millionaire*, found many people to flatter him, and to seek the honour of his society; but the real gentry of the county did not seem anxious to cultivate his acquaintance, and the ladies especially turned a deaf ear to Mrs. Higgins and her wonderful schemes of education. She was particularly annoyed that Dr. Good-enough—a poor creature of a parson without a sixpence, as she indignantly described him—should be consulted in preference to herself, and have more influence and authority; and she determined, at any cost, to assert her sovereignty in her own parish, and to effect a complete revolution in the management of its schools and charities.

But the Vicar was not a man to be easily put down. His high character, and the respect in which he was held, combined with his many genial qualities, and his perfect command of temper, made it impossible to attack him openly; and the only way was to pretend ignorance of his wishes, and gradually to introduce innovations



without his knowledge. With Mary, however, Mrs. Higgins adopted a different line of action, treating her from the first as a child, to be petted and patronized, but not to be allowed to have any opinion of her own. The great lady of the parish (as she chose to consider herself) interfered with all the arrangements of the Vicar's daughter, and when the latter went about her duties in the village in her usual quiet fashion, she found herself everywhere thwarted and controlled by the arbitrary caprice of the new mistress of Aldersleigh.

Things were in this condition when Charlotte and Emma Strong arrived at the Vicarage. To them Mary told her troubles, which she had hitherto made light of to her father, in order not to cause him any vexation on her account.

"And you really mean, dear," said Emma, "that this impertinent woman presumes to upset all your plans, and to dictate to you about things of which you know so much more than she does? Why do you submit to it?"

"Well," said Mary, smiling, "I do not see how I can help it. I am only a country girl, and she

is a lady of fortune, and the chief personage in the parish. I do not mind about myself, but I cannot bear any slight to my dear father, and then she has been so rude to other friends. Do you know when Mrs. Graham and Aunt Jane went with me to the school, she behaved to them in such a manner, that they both declare they will never go there again?"

"And leave her to reign as lady paramount!" cried Charlotte. "No, no, that will never do, Mary. We will go with you next time, and you shall see if we are to be frightened by a she-dragon. But you must leave off that dowdy cloak of yours, and put on your best silk dress, and your new London bonnet. A champion ought to be armed *cap-à-pie* for such an encounter."

"And then you should wear a *crinoline*," said Emma.

"Or else a train," said Charlotte, "which is even more imposing."

"And a *chignon*," said Emma, "the last Paris mode for the hair."

"My dear girls," answered Mary, laughing, "in trying to improve me, you would only make me a complete scarecrow. I should feel so wretchedly awkward in a cage, and I never could fancy sweeping up the dust as I walked. And as for the hair, I am satisfied with my own, and have no wish for any one else's."

"What a vain thing you are, Mary!" said Charlotte. "You prefer your own figure and your own hair to all the adornments of art. I really believe you have never worn either hoops or cages."

"I never liked them, and papa did not approve of them."

"Only listen to that, Emma! This good child actually consults her father about her petticoats!"

"Never mind, Mary dear! you shall not be teased," said Emma. "I only wished we looked half as nice as you do, with all our toggery."

"Besides, what does it matter, you know," continued the merciless Charlotte, "as long as Mr. Vaughan is satisfied? But what I wanted

was to make an impression on this terrible Mrs. Higgins."

"To do that," said Mary, "you must have feathers, and diamonds, and a mantle of the finest lace. She quite overawes the villagers with her splendour, and none of us would have any chance against her in that way."

"Very well," said Charlotte, "we will trust to our intellectual resources; and if we are not a match for any Mrs. Higgins in Christendom, you may tell us we are not our father's daughters."

The next day the three girls went to the school, and found the mistress in great perplexity, in consequence of some fresh whims of her would-be patroness. That lady had objected to the sewing-class, and the catechism, and twenty other things, and wished to introduce an entirely new system of instruction.

"She is not satisfied even with the infant-school," said the mistress, "but wants us to teach the poor babies more than their little heads could possibly hold. And then her sister is such an

extraordinary lady. We cannot understand what she means."

"Depend upon it," replied Charlotte, "you understand her meaning quite as well as she does. But here they come, I expect, to speak for themselves; and if you two," turning to Mary and Emma, "will but support me, we shall have some fun."

"Good morning, my dear Miss Goodenough," said the lady of the Manor, as she sailed into the room all rustling with finery, and followed by her sister in a grave and nun-like dress. "Two of your young friends from the neighbourhood, I suppose?"

"Quite a mistake," replied Charlotte, returning the other's gaze with interest, and assuming the same air of dignified condescension. "We are just arrived from London, and have come to get a little rest after the gaieties of the season."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Higgins, already somewhat discomfited. "Well, Miss Goodenough, you see I am here again on business. I could not conscientiously allow the schools to go on in their

present state. As for the infants, they really do nothing but play; and the girls spend so much time in sewing, that the higher branches are quite neglected. And then the catechism is taught—the Church of England Catechism—which is opposed to religious liberty, you know, and all the enlightened views of the age.”

“But no one has ever objected to it,” pleaded Mary.

“It does not need objections to prove, that it must be very grievous to the consciences of Dissenters.”

“But we have no Dissenters,” said Mary.

“I have reason to believe,” returned Mrs. Higgins, with great solemnity, “that there is a girl in this school, whose father is a Particular Baptist. But I will not discuss these matters with you, my dear. Your experience must, of course, be very limited. Mr. Higgins and I have fully determined on the necessary alterations.”

“With the consent of the clergyman,” added Charlotte, as if there could be no doubt on that head.

"I beg your pardon," said Mrs. Higgins, loftily, "but I thought I understood that you were not an inhabitant of the parish?"

"No, I am not," replied Charlotte, with the utmost nonchalance; "but I have known it from childhood, and have always taken a great interest in its welfare. It is quite a relief from a town life to have a second home in a country place like this."

"There I can sympathize with you," said Miss Jay, in a sentimental tone. "It is amid the charms of rural nature that the soul, restored to its primeval calm, and soothed by the effluence of the supernal light, revels in the exquisite enjoyment of the Good, the True, the Beautiful. Then it is that we cherish the brightest hope of humanity—the hope that the rude chains forged by the tyranny of man may snap at the delicate touch of feminine sensibility, and woman, rescued from her dungeon, assert her empire over the intellect and the heart."

"But, Arabella," said her sister, impatiently, "what has all this to do with the management of the schools?"

"Everything, my dear, if you had but the faculty to perceive it. As it is, alas! I am talking of colours to the blind."

"We are not so blind as you think," interposed Emma, "when the privileges of our sex are concerned. I assure you I have quite followed the thread of your reasoning. You wish to show us that men are inferior animals—useful, perhaps, and sometimes necessary—but on the whole very dull, and coarse, and stupid, and that we women ought to govern the world. Is not that, in humbler language, the sense of what you have expressed so beautifully?"

"Well," replied Arabella, with a languid smile, "you have really some little inkling of the truth. When my book appears, you will be able to view the subject in all its bearings."

"In the meantime, allow me to speak to this young woman," said Mrs. Higgins, turning to the schoolmistress. "I must particularly request that my directions may be attended to—about the sewing, the catechism, and the other little things I mentioned. I can take no excuse."



“It you won’t stick up to her, Mary,” whispered Charlotte, “I must do it for you. Of course,” she added, aloud, “we shall consult Dr. Goodenough on all these matters. He is the person to decide, and every one will submit to his decision. To be sure he is only a man, and may require some of the superior female intelligence of which we have just heard. But, if so, I have no doubt he will ask the advice of Lady ——, who is one of his oldest friends.”

The name was that of a lady of high rank, well known in the neighbourhood, and as much respected for her benevolence as distinguished by her birth and station. Mrs. Higgins winced at the shaft, but soon recovered herself, and returned to the attack.

“I should imagine,” she said, “that Lady —— is too well aware of what is due to *my* position to think of interfering with *my* parish. But, in any case, if our wishes are neglected, Mr. Higgins will certainly withdraw his subscription, and then the schools may probably come to an end.”

“Pardon me,” answered Charlotte; “there you

are entirely misinformed. The old squires of Aldersleigh took too lively an interest in the schools of St. Mary's to leave them to the chance of a subscription. They are provided for by an endowment, and my father is one of the trustees."

"And who, pray, is your father?" cried Mrs. Higgins, "if I may be allowed to ask the question."

"My father is Mr. Strong, for many years legal adviser to the late Squire, and perhaps better acquainted with the affairs of this parish than any one except the Vicar."

"Oh! an attorney's daughter!" said Mrs. Higgins, contemptuously.

"Yes, an attorney's daughter," replied Charlotte, with provoking coolness; "and one that is very proud of her father; and would be equally proud of him if he had sold ribbons across a counter."

This last shot went deeper than the speaker intended. The father of the ladies of Aldersleigh had been a respectable draper in a country town,

who had sent his daughters to a boarding-school, where they acquired the first germs of the airs and graces which had since blossomed so luxuriantly. It is true that the good old man, if he could have returned from his quiet corner in the churchyard, would not have recognised his own children; and they, on their side, seemed to have quite forgotten the kind face which used to smile on them through the glass door of the little parlour behind the shop. But Charlotte's words had aroused some latent memories, and, while Arabella turned away to the window, Mrs. Higgins reddened up to the very roots of her hair.

"This conversation has lasted long enough," said the latter, after a moment's pause. "It can serve no purpose to continue it. You will please to inform your father of my wishes, Miss Good-enough, and I have no doubt he will see the expediency of acceding to them."

"Pray do not cut short the interview on my account," said the imperturbable Charlotte. "I assure you I am not in the least offended at any remark you may have made, and it would be as

well to understand exactly what we are to report to the Vicar. Must we tell him that Church of England children are not to learn the catechism, because some possible Dissenter may prevent his child from joining in the exercise? or that girls are not to be taught sewing, in order that they may have more time to study mathematics and natural philosophy?"

"I did not name those particular sciences," answered Mrs. Higgins; "I only spoke of the higher culture of the mind."

"Of the heart and the affections, you mean, sister," interrupted Miss Jay.

"The intellectual faculties are the first consideration," said Mrs. Higgins.

"And what then is to become of the poetry of life?" asked Arabella.

"I know what will become of a poor man's home," said Charlotte, "if his wife is not able to mend his shirts or darn his stockings."

"And plain work is sometimes found useful in families," suggested Emma; "and as many a young woman has to earn her living by her

needle, it might be desirable to teach her how to handle it."

"The best servant we ever had," continued Charlotte, "came out of Mary's school. She was a faithful, honest, industrious, excellent girl, and could do almost anything, though I don't suppose she knew much about the higher culture of the mind!"

"I must positively decline to proceed with this conversation," cried the mistress of Aldersleigh, in great wrath. "It is altogether improper and out of place. I only hope, Miss Goodenough, you may not be misled by bad advice, and that, when you have more experience, you may learn to distinguish your *real* friends."

"I think I can do that now," replied Mary, with quiet dignity.

"Come, Arabella, let us be going. It is time for us to return to the Hall," said Mrs. Higgins. And with a great shaking of feathers and fluttering of silks, and something that was meant for an ungracious bow, the angry lady took her departure, still followed by her pensive sister.

When they were gone, Charlotte and Emma burst into an uncontrollable fit of laughter, and even the gentle Mary caught the infection of their mirth.

"I told you we should be too much for them," said the elder Miss Strong, as soon as she could speak for laughing. "It was a fair fight, in which the enemy was forced to retreat, and to leave us in possession of all the honours of the day. I congratulate my troops on their victory. And so, with unfurled banners—in the shape of three parasols—let us march homewards in triumph."

When they reached the Vicarage, the story of their adventures was related at full length to Dr. Goodenough. He could not help smiling at the description of their keen encounter, but he shook his head at the consequences.

"I fear we shall have no peace in the parish," he said, "unless I can reconcile these jarring elements. From the time of the Nibelungen, and long before, the most deadly feuds have sprung from the quarrels of women. I must go up to the Hall to-morrow, with a flag of truce and an olive branch."

## CHAPTER XXII.

## OPEN WAR.

THE next day, when the Vicar called at the great house, he was told that the ladies were not at home, but that Mr. Higgins would see him in the library. Admitted to the well-known apartment, he found that gentleman elaborately got up in the character of a British squire, with leather gaiters and velveteen shooting dress, and engaged in conversation with a young man evidently town-bred, and somewhat flashily attired.

"Good morning, Doctor," he said; "I will attend to you directly: but I must finish first with my friend here. This is Mr. Smooth, my managing man at Liverpool. A clever fellow, I can tell you, and one who knows that two and two make

four. It's a great thing, you see, whether I'm up in London or down in Worcestershire, to have a chap with a head on his shoulders to look after my business."

"Ah, Mr. Higgins! you are pleased to say so, sir!" ejaculated Mr. Smooth. "But we all know who regulates everything."

"Well, Smooth, I don't pretend to say that I leave my affairs at the mercy of any one. I may have confidence in you, for instance, but I keep my weather eye open all the same. And as for the clerks, nothing like my system of check upon check. The best way never to be cheated is never to trust anybody further than you can see him."

"The man that would cheat you, Mr. Higgins, must get up very early in the morning."

"I should think so, indeed. You might as well try to catch a weasel asleep. But how about the bank, Smooth? Can't you get the shares to move?"

"Since the grand smash in London, sir, people have grown so uncommonly shy. The shares



hang upon the market, and Scrip says he can do nothing with them."

"Scrip's an ass. Besides, he may be playing his own little game at our expense. So let him fancy he's acting for us, and can do as he likes, but set another broker to work against him, if necessary. And tell Puff to get out a flaming report immediately. We must have the shares at a premium before settling day. There's too much money locked up in those infernal things."

"But suppose the public won't bite?"

"They must and shall bite, I tell you. What are our directors for if they can't rig the market at a pinch? I never would have been chairman if I'd thought I should have to do with such a pack of duffers."

"Shall I speak to Mr. Slow on the subject, sir?"

"How often must I repeat that you needn't trouble yourself about old Slow? I am the head of the firm, and it's to you that I look for assistance, not to my partner, whose only business is to sign what is put before him. And mind you keep

a good watch on the bank people. I don't trust Puff or any of them, only it won't do to let them know it."

"If they get to windward of me, sir, I'll give them leave to cook and eat me."

"That's the ticket, my boy. You and I understand each other. I don't think I've any more instructions to give you at present. Write to me as soon as you reach Liverpool, and keep me informed about the shares."

"All right, sir. And I wish you the best of health, Mr. Higgins, and long life to enjoy the proud position to which you have attained. My prosperity is bound up with yours, you know, sir, and I have every reason to pray for its continuance."

"Which makes me believe you are in earnest: isn't that the English of it, Smooth?"

"Well, sir, I've read in a book somewhere, that gratitude is a strong sense of favours to come."

"You are a sensible fellow, Smooth, and I always thought so. Show me which way a man's

interest lies, and I can give a shrewd guess as to what he will do. Now cut your stick, or you'll be too late for the train."

"All right, Mr. Higgins. I wish you a very good-morning, sir."

"Good morning, Smooth. Give us your fist, and be off like a flash of lightning."

When the door had closed upon the astute manager, Mr. Higgins turned to the Vicar, and continued his discourse as follows:

"I don't trust any of them, Doctor. I keep Smooth to look after the rest, but I have my own checks and spies on Master Smooth. Nothing like the detective system on a large scale. I've read in a life of the Emperor Napoleon how he had Fouché to manage one secret police, and how he had another to keep watch upon Fouché. I've taken a leaf out of the great emperor's book."

"I once asked an old merchant," said the Vicar, in reply, "what security he took for the honesty of his clerks; and he told me that the plan he pursued was to employ persons of good character,

treat them kindly, pay them well, and rely on their integrity and honour. I suppose the scheme answered, for he conducted a large business, and retired with an ample fortune."

"Ah! that must have been in the days of old King Cole," said Mr. Higgins. "It wouldn't do now, I can tell you. *Every one for himself* is our motto at Liverpool. But I have a bone to pick with you, Dr. Goodenough. Mrs. H. informs me that she had a regular row with your daughter and two of her friends."

"I am very sorry there should have been any misunderstanding, Mr. Higgins. It seems that you wish for some alterations in the schools. If so, it would have been much better if you had spoken to me on the subject, and we could have talked it over without troubling the ladies."

"Hang the schools! what the deuce do I care about the schools? But Mrs. H. will have her own way, you know, and you must leave her to do just as she likes in all such matters."

"Pardon me, Mr. Higgins. As Vicar of this parish, and one of the trustees of the charity, I

have duties to perform to all the parties concerned. I am always glad to listen to any reasonable suggestion, but I cannot resign my functions to any other person."

"And I can't be bothered at home, because your functions, as you call them, interfere with my wife's views. You see, Doctor, you should oblige me in such a thing as this. I am the chief man in the parish, and the richest, and the most influential, and it is for your interest to consult my convenience. You will not be the loser by it in the long run."

"I am not aware, Mr. Higgins, that I am ever likely to require a personal favour at your hands; and, if I did so, I should certainly not purchase it at the expense of other people. But, of course, I am anxious to remain on good terms with all my parishioners, and I would make many sacrifices for the sake of peace. That is the reason of my coming here to-day. I wish to explain to you, that this is not a private matter for you or me to decide according to our fancies. The charity is an endowment, imposing certain obli-

gations on those by whom the trust is administered. We have no power to evade them."

"Now you know that's all nonsense, Doctor. If you and I were to settle the thing between us, and you got your friend Strong to approve, who would raise a question about it? Besides, you've only to shut your eyes, and let Mrs. H. manage it all."

"That is just what I cannot do. I am bound to fulfil the trust."

"Bother the trust! what right have dead people to meddle with the affairs of the living? When we get a reformed parliament, we shall make short work of your endowments, I can tell you."

"Perhaps so: but until then I must adhere to the intention of the founders, which was to maintain for ever, in the parish of St. Mary's-in-the-Wold, schools for boys and girls, and also a school for infants, in which they might be trained in the ordinary work suitable to their stations, in the elements of useful learning, and in the Protestant religion as taught by the Church of England.

All this, I fear, would be inconsistent with what I have heard of the theories of Mrs. Higgins."

"Never mind her theories! all I want is to keep her quiet. Let her do as she likes, and you'll find her as jolly as a sand-boy. Surely I ought to know the best mode of dealing with my own wife!"

"Yes; but this is a question of dealing with a public charity. I have no choice in the matter. And, to speak frankly, even if I had more discretion, I could only use it to the best of my judgment, for what I considered the interests of our poor children in this world and the next."

"Then you refuse to oblige me, that's all? Well, Dr. Goodenough, instead of a warm friend, you may find me a very awkward enemy. I'm nasty when I'm riled, as the Americans say."

"I should be sorry to think, Mr. Higgins, that you could be any one's enemy on account of his honest endeavours to do his duty."

"Couldn't I though? You'll see, if you live long enough. This talk about duty is all humbug, and a mere excuse to cross me in my wishes.

But I mean to be master in my own parish, and not to play second fiddle to the parson. I'll see if I can't upset your endowment. Sharp shall throw the whole thing into Chancery. I don't care what money I spend."

"You will act as you may be advised, Mr. Higgins," said the Vicar, rising to take his leave, "but any lawyer will inform you that a Court of Equity will protect established rights. You cannot put your wishes above the law."

"But I tell you what I can do," cried Higgins, the brute nature of the man breaking forth in a sudden burst of savage wrath; "I can ruin you, and Strong, and the whole bunch of you, and make your lives miserable. Money weighs heavier than law, and I know how a cause may be carried from judge to judge, and court to court, till the weaker goes to the wall for want of means. I can ruin you, and I *will* do it, by jingo!"

"I can only hope, Mr. Higgins, that the next time we meet you may be in a more Christian frame of mind. I wish you a good morning."

"Oh! hang your preaching!" began the other;



but before he could proceed farther the Vicar was already gone. Then it first occurred to Mr. Higgins that his behaviour might not, perhaps, have been altogether consistent with his assumed character of an English gentleman, and for a single moment he felt a slight sense of shame. But he consoled himself by the reflection that, after all, what right had a beggarly parson to contradict a man like him? And, if money wouldn't enable you to have your own way in everything, what was the use of it?

From that day there was open war in the parish. Every petty annoyance which the possessors of great wealth can inflict on their less prosperous neighbours was had recourse to by the ungenerous holders of Aldersleigh. They had their tools and parasites to aid and support them in this line of conduct; but, for the credit of human nature be it said, they also met with a stout resistance, especially amongst the poor. The Vicar was too well known, and too generally beloved and respected, to be abandoned by those to whose welfare he had devoted the best part of a long and

useful life. Neither bribes nor threats could prevail on the majority of the people to turn against their pastor. On the contrary, when they saw him treated with marked neglect and discourtesy, a feeling of resentment filled their minds, and they expressed their opinions of the new comers in no very measured terms.

"They tell me," said the village shoemaker to the village blacksmith, "I shall lose the custom of the Hall if I speak a good word for the parson. But I can't forget what he did for me when the children were down with the scarlet fever; and I mean to stand by him, if I never make or mend another pair for the folks at Aldersleigh. And, after all, their custom won't be much of a catch, I take it. The old Squire had all his boots and shoes made in the village, but these folks have theirs from London. I suppose our work ain't good enough for the like of they."

"Well," returned the blacksmith, "I don't make much account of 'em. Mr. Higgins was here t'other day about getting his horse shod, and he knows no more about horses than an old apple-

woman. He's very rich and grand, they say, but, somehow, he don't look to me like one of the right sort."

"It's certain sure," continued the shoemaker, "that these new gentry is nowadays the same as the old ones, and it don't stand to reason they should be. When a man has been riding all his life, he sits quiet and easy in the saddle, and don't make no fuss about it; but you put a fellow on horseback for the first time, and he finds it uncommon hard to keep his seat, and yet fancies how well he does it, and how all the folks is looking at him."

"That's true, neighbour," replied the blacksmith; "and some iron is soon welded, and some you may hammer at for a month and no good at the end. But, as for the parson, he's the finest gentleman, to my thinking, I ever come across, for he speaks as kind and humble-like to a beggar-boy as he would to a king."

"I tell you what it is, neighbour," said the shoemaker, "he learned his manners out of his Bible. He don't look at it as an old book, just to

read out of on Sundays, but he takes the Lord for his model, and practices what he preaches. *There's* the great difference between him and these stuck-up bodies."

The shoemaker was right. The Vicar was emphatically a Christian gentleman, and his religion had no small influence on his outward bearing. Nor did he forget his principles on the present occasion. No studied slights or vulgar insults could provoke remonstrance or retaliation on his part. He met them with a calm and dignified silence, and imposed a similar forbearance on his friends. It was only where the interests or privileges of others were concerned that he offered a steady and active opposition to the enemy.

Before long, a formal communication was received from Mr. Sharp, threatening a Chancery suit on the subject of the schools. He was, of course, referred to Mr. Strong, who lost no time in writing to the Vicar as follows:—

"Make yourself quite easy, my dear friend. It is only a *brutum fulmen*. If Sharp, who is not a fool, lets them go into court, it can only be for the

sake of his costs, as he must know there is not the shadow of a case. Depend upon it, the Chancery suit is all moonshine. But I fear you may be plagued and pestered in other ways, and such people as Mr. Higgins and his family would have exhausted the patience of the Man of Uz himself. It is a good thing, however, that your friends the Whigs have not yet abolished the Church Establishment. Only think if you were dependent on the whims of your chief parishioner for your Sunday's dinner! I am afraid poor Mary and my girls would have to go without their pudding; while, as it is, you can show as clear a title to the eggs and butter, as this fellow can to his estate, or any peer to his coronet.

"Talking of the Whigs, what do you think of them now? When I see them, without a single original idea of their own, adopting all the ineffable nonsense spouted on Radical platforms, I begin to regard them with a feeling akin to pity. Can this be the great party which you and I remember in our youth—which, whatever its principles, was at all events illustrious by its

talents—which had Grey for a leader, Brougham for an orator, Sydney Smith for a wit, and Tom Moore for a poet? Why, the very names are a satire on the poverty of the new generation!”

To this the Vicar replied :

“ I am very glad to hear what you say about the Chancery suit. I had no fear they could upset the trust, but it would not be pleasant to spend the rest of our lives in litigation. As for minor annoyances, they must be borne like the buzzing of the great bluebottle that is now whirling about my nose. I would not kill the fly if I could catch him, and I hope I bear no malice to my rich neighbour at Aldersleigh. He has not succeeded in spoiling my sleep.

“ As for the Whigs, a political party cannot always command the services of first-rate abilities, and, if its principles are sound, it must learn to do without them :

“ *Integer vitæ, scelerisque purus*  
*Non eget MAURI jaculis, neque arcu.*”

To which Mr. Strong rejoined :

“ You are very ingenious, my dear Goodenough,

but I cannot allow you to escape from the argument by a pun. It is just because the Whigs have *no* principles—that is, none of their own, only formularies borrowed from the Radicals—that they need all the assistance which genius, wit, or eloquence could give them to maintain their old influence in the country. Failing these, they are a lost and ruined party. They may pin themselves to the tail of an accomplished rhetorician, who was once a Tory, and is now anything you please; but as Whigs they have ceased to exist, and nothing can restore their distinctive political character.

“Under these circumstances, even Mr. Higgins may be worth studying. If the old gods are to be dethroned and new idols set up in their places, it may be well to know what kind of men will inaugurate the next apotheosis of Liberalism. Such as the worshippers are, such will be the deities and the temple.”

“Our friend is getting poetical in his old age,” said the Vicar, with a smile, as he finished the reading of this epistle. “There is always some

weight in his words, but his enthusiasm carries him too far. Whether Whigs and Tories rise or fall, such men as Mr. Higgins will never be able to govern England. The habits and traditions of hundreds of years are against them, and the feelings of the poor on this head are just as strong as those of the educated classes. I doubt whether our new Squire has many partisans, even in his own parish."

The Squire must have known by this time that such was the case. The people looked askew at him as he drove in his gorgeous carriage through the village. Of course he had his admirers, but they were not amongst the wisest or steadiest of the population. His chief supporters belonged to the baser sort, who found that more drink and other indulgences might be procured, by a little insolence to the Vicar and a good deal of servility at the Hall. And there could be no mistake as to the sentiments of the neighbouring gentry. Men who would have blackballed Mr. Higgins at any of their clubs, rode over to call on Dr. Good-enough, or sent him their compliments and their



game; and high-born dames, who only vouchsafed the coldest of bows to the ladies of Aldersleigh, were affable with Mrs. Graham and her sister, and quite friendly with the Vicar's daughter.

"I shall not come down to this confounded hole next year, I can tell you," said Mr. Higgins to his wife; "we will go to Florence or Naples, where proper respect is paid to people of fortune. There we can find plenty of princes and grandees, who will be glad enough to court the honour of our society; and, while we are away, I will have this old house pulled down, and such a mansion built as will astonish the natives. I never do things by halves, and I mean to take the shine out of all the nobs in the county."

## CHAPTER XXIII.

## A DISCOVERY.

GEORGE STRONG had just returned from a fishing expedition to Norway, and was relating to Reginald, in his usual half-lazy, half-bantering tone, a story of perilous adventures that was by no means deficient in stirring interest, when they were interrupted by the arrival of a letter. It bore the Bethnal Green postmark, and ran as follows:—

“MY DEAR MR. VAUGHAN,

“In the course of my ministrations, I have met with an old woman, a very singular character, who appears to be well acquainted with sundry matters on which, if I am not mistaken, you were

at one time seeking information. She seems to know all about the secret history of the Vaughans, and (if I am right in my conjectures as to certain points) could communicate facts of some importance with regard to the disposal of the family estate. At all events, you might think it desirable to see her, and if you like to call on me any morning, I shall be happy to accompany you to her abode.

“Believe me

“Yours truly,

“JOHN CROSBY.”

“I hardly know if this concerns me,” said Reginald. “It might be of interest to Mr. Higgins; but, now that the poor old Squire is gone, I care too little for the present possessors of Aldersleigh to trouble myself about the history of their immediate ancestors.”

“But suppose it should affect their title?” said George. “From what you have told me, they seem to be very unpleasant neighbours to our friend the Vicar, and for that reason alone you might like to give them notice to quit.”

"If there were any hope of that," answered Reginald, "it would certainly be worth attending to. Not that I bear any ill-will to a blockhead like Higgins, who acts according to his lights, and is greatly to be pitied for his selfish stupidity. But he has done mischief enough already, and may do much more. Mary tells me that he not only tries to make them all uncomfortable, but that his influence in the village is highly pernicious; and as for the old Hall, he is rumoured to have expressed an intention of pulling it down. That would indeed be a profanation!"

"You had better hear what the old woman has to say, Reginald. If you like, I will go with you."

"Now, really that is very good-natured, George; for a journey into the unknown regions of Bethnal Green will be worse to you than another trip to Norway."

"Well, you see, I have taken a sudden fancy for travelling. I think of joining the Geographical Society, and of course I must fit myself to become a distinguished member."

The morning after this conversation, the two

young men proceeded together to Mr. Crosby's house, and were conducted by that gentleman to a baker's shop, over which lived the object of their search, in small but cleanly lodgings.

"I have not known her long," said the clergyman, "but somehow I have gained her confidence. I was called in to see her by our doctor when she was very ill; and although she has strange opinions of her own, and is somewhat of a free-thinker in religion, she gave me credit for good intentions, and expressed a wish, when she recovered, that I should continue to visit her occasionally. I am afraid she was actuated by the love of talk rather than by any desire to profit by spiritual advice, but I could not refuse the poor old lady's request. She is above eighty years of age, and not able to move from the house; but her mind is still clear and strong, and she has been a woman of remarkable energy. When I add that her father was a French hairdresser and a Republican, that she herself has been a milliner, and that she lives on a small annuity, you know as much about her as I do."

When they entered the front room over the baker's, they found a little old woman, very neatly dressed, with those black, piercing, bead-like eyes which are so seldom seen in an English face, seated in a large arm-chair, and occupied with some kind of knitting.

"Good-morning, Mrs. Laroche," said the clergyman. "Allow me to introduce two of my friends. One of them is the Mr. Vaughan I mentioned."

"I am glad to see any of your friends, Mr. Crosby," replied the old lady, glancing curiously at Reginald as she spoke. "I lead such a lonely life now that I almost forget how to receive company. But pray be seated, gentlemen."

"I ought to apologise for this visit," said Reginald; "but Mr. Crosby assured us that we should not be intruding, and that you would have no objection to give us some information with regard to the Vaughan family."

"You are not one of the Vaughans of Aldersleigh?" said the old lady.

"I am one of an old branch of the family that

emigrated to America. Personally, I have no concern in the matter; but I feel some interest in the home of my ancestors, and am not indifferent into whose hands it falls."

"I hear from Mr. Crosby," continued the old lady, "that a person of the name of Higgins is now in possession of the property. Is he a son or grandson of Peter Higgins of Manchester?"

"A grandson, I believe," answered Reginald.

"Yes, I know it is so," said George, "for I saw the papers when my uncle was examining the title."

"Then he is also the grandson of Caroline Vaughan?" said Mrs. Laroche, as her memory seemed to travel back to distant times. "She was always a pert child, and very wayward. Most people thought her pretty, but it was only a doll's prettiness, after all."

"Were you well acquainted with her?" asked Reginald.

"Well acquainted! It would be strange indeed if I had not been well acquainted with Caroline. We were brought up together in the

same house, and we had our quarrels and rivalries, both as children and grown girls. She took too much upon herself, and I was rather glad when Peter carried her off."

"My dear Mrs. Laroche," said the clergyman, "would you oblige us by giving a connected narrative of these events? No one can do it better than yourself, and it is the only way to make my friends here understand the story."

"Well, Mr. Crosby, I will do my best to satisfy you. I was a very little child when Mr. Edward Vaughan and his wife (she who had been a dancer at the Opera) came to lodge at my father's house with their infant daughter Caroline. My father was a Frenchman, who had come to England to avoid being shut up in the Bastille. He was a well-known artist in hair, and also a man of stern Republican principles."

"A Radical barber," said George Strong to himself.

"He had often refused to work for the French Court," continued the old lady, "but he once went all the way to Ferney to dress a peruke for



Monsieur de Voltaire. However, he was now living in Soho with my mother and me, when Mr. and Mrs. Edward Vaughan came to lodge with us. I can just remember the figure of a fine, tall gentleman, but her I have quite forgotten. They were not with us more than a year or two, poor things! when they both fell into bad health, and died within a few months of each other. He had been discarded by his father and family, and it was said that disappointment and vexation had hastened his end. His widow did not live long after him — but long enough to give birth to another child."

"What!" cried Reginald. "There was another child by this marriage! Was it a daughter?"

"Bless you, no," replied the old lady. "It was a son."

"This begins to get quite interesting," said George.

"It was a son, I tell you, and worth twenty such girls as Caroline. I can see him now, just as he was when we used to play together as children, more than seventy years ago. My

poor, dear, brave, handsome, unfortunate Harry Vaughan!"

"Does any evidence exist of this boy's birth?" asked the clergyman.

"To be sure. I can give you the name of the church where he was christened; for his poor dying mother would have it done, though my father thought it nonsense. Please to reach me down that old volume from the shelf there."

Mr. Crosby handed her the book, as requested. It was a copy of Rousseau's "Contrat Social."

"This was our Bible in those days," said the old lady, smiling archly at the clergyman; "and here are all the particulars about the children, entered in my father's handwriting."

"Yes, it appears to be quite complete. But what became of this Harry?"

"I will tell you all in good time, but you must let me take my own way of telling it. What a beautiful boy he was! and grew up into such a fine, tall fellow, like his father! Do you know, this gentleman reminds me of him," she added, turning to Reginald.

"But how was it," asked he, "that the people at Aldersleigh never knew of the birth of these children?"

"I will tell you how it happened. My father was a fierce Republican, and hated all aristocrats; but once, when Edward Vaughan was very ill, and sore pressed for money, and yet too proud to apply again to old Gerald Vaughan for assistance, my father went down to Aldersleigh to represent the state of the case. He was refused admittance, and very rudely treated, though he said that he came on behalf of a son of the house. Then he swore in his rage that the poor gentleman should never be beholden to them for a penny—neither he, nor any of his race—and he kept his word. He supplied the wants of the parents while they lived, and when they died he took care of the orphans; but he kept the family in ignorance of their existence, and brought up the children to ask no questions about them."

"Your father's heart must have been better than his judgment," said Mr. Crosby. "It was very kind of him to take charge of the children,

but he certainly was not justified in separating them from their family."

"Ah, sir!" replied the old lady, shaking her head; "it all depends, you know, on the point of view. He believed it was for their good to keep them in a lower station of life. If the great Jean Jacques himself sent his own children to the Foundling Hospital, no wonder one of his disciples held such an opinion. So we were all treated as one family, and remained in the same house in Soho till my poor mother died. Then my father grew weary of it, and removed to York. I will not trouble you with a long story; but Harry was fond of me, and I of him, poor fellow!—and Caroline was jealous of my influence with her brother—and, in short, we had our crosses, like other people. My father was a just man, but somehow she made mischief between us; and then Harry, who was a high-spirited lad, with wild blood in his veins, would never settle to business, and ran away to sea. He was shipwrecked, and taken prisoner by the French, and suffered all sorts of hardships before he came back again; and, by

that time, my father was dead, and Caroline married to Peter Higgins, a stupid lout of a Yorkshireman, who afterwards settled in Manchester; and I had returned to London, and was earning my own bread as a milliner. Harry found out his sister, and asked her for my address; but, for some reason of her own, she never gave it him, though she knew it well enough all the while, and I did not see him again till it was too late for any good. For he grew reckless after that, and went down in the world, sometimes wandering about the country, and sometimes working as a common labourer. When we met at last, which was by mere chance in the street, he was in poor circumstances, and much altered; but I should have known Harry Vaughan anywhere. Then I found that in some of his wanderings, when he was down with the hop-pickers in Kent, he had married a publican's daughter at Maidstone, and that he had one child, a girl, whom he christened Louise—which is my name, you see, and shows he hadn't forgotten me. Well, to make a long story short, I did what I could for his wife and

child—he would never take anything for himself, poor fellow!—and when he died, still young, worn out with the hard life he had led, I wanted to keep the girl as my own; but the mother wouldn't consent, and they went away to some cousins of hers in Herefordshire, and by degrees I lost sight of them."

"Do you mean to say," asked Reginald, who was now much interested, "that you do not know what became of Louise Vaughan?"

"Well, sir, you see, people in their condition—they were living altogether amongst poor, ignorant folks—very seldom write letters, and are easily lost sight of by friends at a distance. But I did hear of the girl years afterwards; and then she was married to one John Rough, a miner in the Forest of Dean."

"John Rough!" exclaimed Reginald, starting to his feet. "What if it should turn out that she was the mother of my friend Jack?"

The old lady looked at him with piercing eyes, as if trying to penetrate his meaning.

"I do not understand you, sir," she said at

length ; " but one thing is clear to me. If Louise Vaughan left a son, he is the heir of Aldersleigh, and this grandson of Caroline Higgins has taken what never belonged to him. Old as I am, I would spend what little strength is left me to see right done to a descendant of my poor Harry."

" But, my dear Mrs. Laroche," asked the clergyman, " how came you never to think of this before ?"

" Don't you see, Mr. Crosby, that I thought the old family were still quietly in possession ? I had not heard of their dying out."

" What you have been kind enough to tell us," said Reginald, " is really very important, and may involve the interests of many persons. You will not object to repeat all this on a future occasion, and to furnish other particulars if required ? May we call on you again to-morrow ?"

" Certainly. And if you can find the heir of Harry Vaughan, it shall be no fault of mine if he does not get his own. Do you think I would let a grandson of Caroline Higgins stand in the way ?

She did me many an ill turn in life ; and, though you may think it wrong, Mr. Crosby, I should like to be even with her yet !”

That afternoon, the whole story was repeated to Mr. Strong, and the next morning the lawyer accompanied his friends to Bethnal Green. Mrs. Laroche’s narrative was reduced to writing, and embodied, with other facts, in the form of a declaration. Then notes were taken of every name, place, or date, which might aid in pursuing the investigation, and, before Mr. Strong left the house, he was in possession of all the leading points of the case.

“ We must divide our forces, Reginald,” he said, as they emerged from a cross street into the crowded thoroughfare of Shoreditch. “ I will set to work at once in Soho, to establish the birth of Harry Vaughan ; and you had better go down to Maidstone, to prove his marriage, and also the birth of his child, who seems to have been christened from her grandfather’s house there. You will be sure to come upon some traces of the old publican, for Englishmen always remember every-



thing connected with their beer. When we have once made out the identity and legitimacy of Louise Vaughan, we shall have to proceed with our inquiries in Herefordshire and Gloucestershire, so as to establish her marriage, and the birth of her children, if any. All this will take some time."

"I tell you what, uncle," said George, in his deliberate way, "just leave the latter part of the business to me. While you are poking about London, and Reginald airing his heels in Kent, I will make a tour of the Wye, and see what I can do in those regions."

"You!" cried Mr. Strong, in surprise. "I should as soon have thought of hearing you were made Lord Chancellor."

"All in good time, uncle. Rome wasn't built in a day, you know. Only let me have my instructions, and I will go down to Ross by the night-train."

"To-morrow will be early enough. A new convert always runs into extremes, and now you have begun to move, George, we shall none of us be

able to keep pace with you. But seriously, my dear boy, nothing could give me greater pleasure than to see you bestirring yourself in this matter, and I will prepare your instructions at once."

"I want a little recreation," said George. "I'm tired of smoking cigars and reading novels, and my trip to the North has given me a taste for travelling. Besides, there is good fishing on the Wye."

"And till we are certain of all our facts," continued Mr. Strong, "I think it will be better not to mention our suspicions to any one."

"Not even to the Vicar and Mary?" asked Reginald.

"Well, it can do no good, and I have known mischief arise from premature disclosures. Mary would tell my girls; and though they are good girls enough, and as discreet as other daughters of Eve, they would probably tell somebody else; and then the affair would get public, and we should have Sharp plotting against us, and doing all in his power to lead us off the scent. These things are best managed quietly."

So the plan of the campaign was arranged, and, in due course, each man departed on his separate mission. Some weeks elapsed, and, at the end of that time, Mr. Strong and Reginald had completed their part of the business to their perfect satisfaction. They had established, beyond all doubt, the descent of Harry from Edward Vaughan, the marriage of the first-named, and the birth of his daughter; but as yet they had heard nothing from George. Mr. Strong was beginning to grow impatient, when, one evening, as he and Reginald were sitting together over their wine in Russell Square, George sauntered into the room, as if he had just come from the Temple.

"So here you are at last!" cried his uncle.  
"When did you arrive in London?"

"This afternoon, by the express. I hope I see you both in a perfect state of preservation?"

"Thank you, we are quite well—if that is what you mean. But why have you not written to us all this time?"

"My dear uncle, I object to the wanton waste of pen, ink, and paper. I just waited till I had

something definite to say. I might have sent you a description of the woodland scenery at Symond's Yat, or of the fine view from the Buck Stone, but I did not think those subjects would particularly interest you. And as for the fishing, you know, it is not quite the same thing as in Norway, and my worst adventure was tumbling into a pool and scrambling out again."

"Confound your fishing! Have you done anything in our business or not?"

"Now please to have a little patience, my dear uncle, and give me a glass of wine. I would not stop to get a bath at the Great Western, and I am half choked with the dust."

"Help yourself. Shall I order up some dinner for you?"

"I do not absolutely say 'no' to that proposition. But now I have cleared my throat, I will try to answer your former question. Yes; I think I have done something in the great Aldersleigh case."

He pulled out a bundle of papers, and handed them to his uncle. It is true, that, instead of

red tape, they were tied together with a piece of packthread; but they seemed to be arranged in order, and were systematically endorsed and numbered.

"If I am not mistaken," said George, "you have there all the links in a very pretty chain of evidence, with affidavits and certificates enough to gladden the soul of an attorney. I think I can prove to demonstration that Louise Vaughan, the daughter of Harry Vaughan and Sarah Butts, was married to John Rough at Coleford; that they had a son, who was born in the Forest of Dean; and that this son is the identical Jack Rough, whom Reginald rescued from the fever."

"My dear boy," cried Mr. Strong, shaking his nephew heartily by the hand, "you will be a lawyer and a man of business after all! But how could you prove Jack's identity?"

"The descriptions tally so exactly, that I have no doubt on the subject. But there are plenty of old miners who remember him from his birth. I went up to a place in the Forest, called the Speech House, and there I held a kind of court on my

own account. We had lots of beer and cider, and made ourselves very comfortable."

"My dear George," said Reginald, "you have done more than either of us in this affair, and, if Jack gets the estate, he will owe it in a great measure to your exertions. I suppose the next step will be to find out where he is?"

"Certainly," said Mr. Strong; "and we will all go together in search of him. I think we are entitled to the pleasure of telling the first news, and we may have some difficulty in persuading him of the truth of our tidings. I will look over these papers to-night, and, if all is in order, I see no reason why we should not go down to Wolverhampton to-morrow."

"All right," answered George. "One may as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb, you know. Having once done a day's work, I never expect to have any peace again. It was an evil hour which brought you to my chambers, Reginald!"

"Talk as much nonsense as you like this evening, my boy," said Strong. "You have earned the right of playing the fool if you please; and

that is a privilege which only a wise man may justly claim."

"And that is the first compliment I ever got from my excellent uncle. If it does not turn my head I must have inherited some of the family strength of mind !"

## CHAPTER XXIV.

## THE BRICKMAKERS.

IT was a dreary scene in the blackest and ugliest of districts. The roads were cinders, the hedges were mud-banks, the only fields were brick-fields, and the air was laden with smoke and mephitic vapours. But never, through the purple vines and orange groves of the South, moved a finer figure than that of the tall, handsome, blue-eyed English labourer, who, in garments red with clay, and with brown locks curling about soot-besmirched brows, came forth from his work at mid-day to rest himself awhile in the shade. Passing out of the sunlight into the shadow of a low wall, he threw himself at full length on the ground, and began to fill his pipe.



He had not been there long, when two other men, in the same rank and habit as himself, but of a far lower type in face and feature, came to the place where he lay, and took their station beside him, leaning against the wall.

"A fine day, mates," said Rough. "Are you working hereabouts?"

"No, we ain't," replied one of the men, sulkily.

"We ain't working at all," said the other, "and we don't mean to work, so long as we can't get our rights. We're on strike all along the country side, and the masters must have give in already, if so be a lot of rascals hadn't come to take the bread out of our mouths. We knows you, Jack Rough, and we has our eyes on you, so you'd better jine our Union, or give over working in these parts,"

"I know nothing about Unions," answered Jack, "and I don't want to know. Look here, mates: I've earned my own living since I was a bit of a boy not much higher than my knee, and I've worked at different trades in all parts of the country; and so long as I have my health and

strength, I'm not afraid of starving. If one thing won't answer, another will. But to make the best use of the limbs that God loans to me, I must be free to come and go as I like, and not ask Tom, Dick, and Harry where and how I'm to work. I wouldn't meddle with any other man, except to give him a little help if I could, and I don't choose any other man to meddle with me. I want nothing of your Union, and I don't see what your Union has to do with my business."

"Them's infernal selfish views," said one of the brickmakers. "We wants to raise our wages, and to fix what hours of work we thinks proper, and not to let the masters have it all their own way. And what right has the likes of you to come and meddle with our rules?"

"I don't meddle with your rules," answered Jack. "You work as much or as little as you please, and, if there ain't brickmakers enough in the country, the masters will have to give in. But if there's more hands than work, all your rules won't alter it, and you'll only bring yourselves to grief. All I ask is just to be let alone."

"And why should you be let alone," said the brickmaker, "to fill your belly, when other men's in want of a meal?"

"I'll share my meal gladly," answered Jack, "with any poor devil that wants it. But I shan't help you or myself by stopping work altogether and driving the masters out of the trade. That's what I think, you see, and time will show who's right and who's wrong. But, right or wrong, I may bring my pigs to my own market, and it ain't for the likes of you to make laws for the likes of me."

"Then you won't jine the Union?"

"No, I won't—and that's enough."

"Then I tell you what it is, Jack Rough: we must find a way to make you."

"How many of you?" said the tall labourer, scornfully. "I'd take any dozen of you, one down and t'other come on. Only let it be a fair fight, and no favour."

"You think yourself a mighty fine chap, I'll be bound!"

"I think I can take my own part as well as

another. If you don't believe it, you'd better try."

"You be ready to fight us, then, be you?"

"As many as you like, one at a time."

"We'll show you a thing or two afore we've done with you. Come along, Giles. It's no use talking to such a stubborn hound."

"Keep clear of the hound's teeth, that's all," said Jack, as the hostile brickmakers walked away together. "I've lived too long in a wood to be scared by the hooting of owls."

When Rough had finished his pipe, he went back quietly to his work. After the first natural burst of contemptuous anger at the threats of the brickmakers, he felt a kind of pitying sorrow that poor men should thus add to the evils of their lot by unjust treatment of each other. Jack had a large heart, full of warm, human sympathies, and what he had said was quite true—that he would gladly share his daily meal with a suffering fellow-creature. He had done so often enough to prove the sincerity of his words. But he had also a strong masculine intellect, however uncultivated,

and experience and reflection had taught him that the great laws of labour cannot be altered by artificial arrangements, and that, do what you will, the bulk of mankind must earn their bread by the sweat of their brows.

"It stands to reason," he said to himself, "that we can't all be masters and gentlemen. It's God's will that there should always be rich and poor in the world, and the way to make the best of it is to be helpful and friendly. I suppose every class has troubles of its own, and I don't know, in the long run, that a poor man is much worse off than a rich one. But if we go on snarling at one another, like cat and dog, the world will soon be a bad place to live in. Let every one mind his own business, and do his work like a man, and we shall get on a deal better than by all this talk and grumbling."

So the brave fellow set himself heart and soul to his task, and made such progress with it as would have astonished most of the members of the Union. He worked as long as the daylight lasted, for the masters, embarrassed by the strike, paid

well for extra hours. Then he put on his jacket, and walked slowly homewards through the gathering gloom of an autumn evening. He had to pass up a long, narrow, lonely lane, between rows of deserted huts and extinguished brick-kilns; and just as he reached about the middle of it, he heard a low whistle, and was suddenly confronted by a number of men, with blackened faces and threatening aspect, while others came stealing from the huts in the rear, to cut off the possibility of retreat. Jack saw the danger in a moment, and stood resolutely on his guard.

"Stop there, Jack Rough!" said one of the men. "You don't go a step farther till you comes to our terms. You must take a hoath to jine us, or you never leaves this place alive!"

"I don't think you're bad enough for that," answered Jack; "but, whether you mean it or no, I'm not going to be frightened by you, or twenty times your number. I was born a free Englishman, and, please God, I'll die a free Englishman. Stand out of the way!"

He stepped boldly forward, and, for a moment,

those in front recoiled before the tall, commanding figure, which looked doubly imposing in the dim twilight; but a treacherous ruffian crept stealthily on him from behind, and struck him on the back of the head with a heavy bludgeon. He reeled beneath the violence of the blow, and sank upon his knees; but, even in falling, he caught hold of the two men nearest to him, and dragged them with him to the ground. Then all rushed upon him, like beasts of prey on their victim. He defended himself with the courage of a hero, but he was soon overpowered by numbers; and as he lay stunned and senseless on the earth, they beat him about the head with sticks and stones, kicked him with their thick hobnailed shoes, and indulged in every excess of ferocious cruelty. A few minutes more, and one of those atrocious crimes would have been consummated which of late years have disgraced the annals of British labour; but, in the midst of the outrage, some of the assassins caught the sound of footsteps rapidly approaching, and three men running swiftly up the lane appeared suddenly on the scene of action.

"You cowardly villains!" cried Reginald Vaughan, as with one sweep of his powerful arm he struck down the foremost of the assailants. "Would you commit murder?"

"One—two!" said George Strong, quietly, as he sent a second of the brickmakers sprawling upon his back. "Pitch into them right and left, Reginald. Come on, you vagabonds; I didn't go to Eton for nothing!"

Meanwhile the elder Mr. Strong had torn a huge stake from the remains of a broken fence, and, brandishing it over his head, rushed to the assistance of his friends.

"In the Queen's name!" he shouted in a voice of thunder. "Strike another blow at your peril. Surrender in the Queen's name!"

Those words have still a magical effect on Englishmen, however coarse and rude, for they come armed with the authority of centuries of law and order, triumphant over brute force and savage will. Awed by the sound, startled by the suddenness of the attack, alarmed by their own evil consciences, and uncertain as to the strength of the



force opposed to them, the brickmakers offered no serious resistance. They made one wild rally to extricate their fallen comrades, and then fled precipitately from the spot.

The gentlemen did not pursue them, for they were too much occupied with the rescued but still unconscious Rough. At first, they almost feared he was dead ; but as they tore open his garments, and bared the muscular throat and brawny chest to the air, they could see that he still breathed and feel the beating of his heart. A little water from a neighbouring puddle restored him to some degree of sensation, and soon after he raised his eyelids, and murmured some inarticulate sounds. They would, however, have found it very difficult to remove him if further assistance had not arrived. But now many footsteps were heard approaching, and a crowd of people, led by a ragged, barefooted urchin, came streaming up the lane.

What had happened can easily be explained. Mr. Strong and his friends had gone down to Wolverhampton to make inquiries after Rough, and were sent from place to place in search of

him, for some time without success. At length they came upon his track, and discovered the exact spot where he was then employed. They arrived there towards evening, and proceeded at once to the brickfield, where they found only a poor beggar-woman and a ragged boy, preparing to take their night's lodging on some straw in a deserted shed. On their asking if she knew anything of Jack, whose appearance they fully described to her, the woman answered that she had seen him earlier in the day, and that he had given her part of his dinner; but that he was now gone home, she believed, by the lane on the other side of the road. She had indeed come back to the field, to warn him of a plot she had overheard to waylay him on his return from work; but she had failed to meet with him, and feared it was now too late.

"But if you are friends of his," she added, "you will follow him as fast as you can. There are those abroad who will do him some great mischief, if they do not kill him outright."

"And why, in the name of common sense,"

cried Strong, "have you loitered here instead of raising the alarm?"

"I am but a woman," she answered, "and it might be as much as my life is worth. Besides, who would listen to a poor creature like me?"

Reginald did not wait to hear more, but hastened in the direction of the lane, followed closely by George. Mr. Strong drew a sovereign from his pocket, and held it up before the eyes of the boy.

"Look here, my lad," he said. "This is a real golden sovereign. You shall have it if you run as fast as you can to the next public-house, and tell every man you meet that there is murder going on in the lane yonder, and that they are to come with you."

Not another word was necessary. The urchin darted off with the speed of a greyhound, whilst the lawyer followed his friends in the opposite direction, at a pace that was really marvellous for one of his age and corpulence.

They arrived, as we have seen, just in time. The additional succours which now appeared upon

the field were brought by the rejoicing and triumphant beggar-boy, proud of his exertions and eager for his promised reward.

The last comers were chiefly men in the lower ranks of life, but there could be no doubt as to their feelings with regard to the character of the outrage. In spite of the new code of morals propagated by the trades' unions, and the confusion of right and wrong apparent in the teaching of some writers and speakers, murder has not yet been naturalized amongst us, and there is still a good old English prejudice against cruelty, cowardice, and treachery.

"I'll fight any man for a pot of porter," said a huge navvy, "if so be it's in broad daylight, and all square and aboveboard. But waylay a man in the dark, and hit 'un when he's down! I'm not such a Hottentot as that, and these 'ere gem'men thinks the same!"

The gentlemen thus appealed to, consisting of a sweep, a dustman, and a couple of stokers, expressed their concurrence in these opinions, which were confirmed by the higher authority of a publi-

can and a butcher. Mr. Strong now took the direction of affairs, and some boards being procured from the neighbourhood, and tied together to form a litter, Jack Rough was carried carefully to the public-house, and a messenger despatched to the nearest town for a surgeon.

Reginald had seen enough of war and adventure to know the readiest and most available modes of treating wounds and contusions, and was able to do what was necessary until the arrival of the professional man. The great fear was, that there might be some serious injury to the brain; but the patient soon began to show symptoms of returning consciousness, and by the time the surgeon reached the place, he was able to pronounce that, although Jack had been much shaken by the brutal violence he had sustained, there was every reason to hope that his fine constitution would bring him safely through. For the next few days and nights, Reginald and George were unremitting in their attendance on the sick-bed, taking it in turn to sit up, and performing all the offices of careful and attentive nurses. Mr. Strong was

obliged to go to London, but his young friends kept him informed of the progress of the invalid, and, in little more than a week, he had the pleasure of hearing that Jack might be considered convalescent.

It was requisite at first to keep the patient perfectly quiet, and to avoid all exciting subjects of conversation ; but, as he grew stronger, he became very anxious to know exactly what had taken place, and to explain the presence of the two young men at his bed-side. They were forced to give him a full account of the meeting with the beggar-woman, and of the subsequent rescue from the brickmakers.

"I owe my life a second time to you, sir," he said, grasping Reginald's hand. "If ever I forget it, may everything that's good forget *me*!"

"My friend here did quite as much as I did," answered Reginald, with a smile, "and his uncle was a real tower of strength against the enemy. They were frightened at the very sound of his voice."

"You should have seen how we bowled them

over," said George, laughing. "It was the best lark I have had since I left school. I would not have lost the fun for twenty pounds."

"It must have been no child's play, though," said Rough, "and I thank you, sir, and your uncle and all, for helping me at a pinch. But what brought you into these parts? and why was you looking out for me?"

"Mr. Strong will make all that clear to you when he comes back from London," replied Reginald. "At present, my dear Jack, you must not talk too much."

When Mr. Strong returned to Staffordshire, he found Jack sitting up with his friends, and fast recovering from the effects of the late onslaught. He congratulated him warmly on his escape, and then began to question him as to whether he could identify his assailants.

"If we could get any trace of them," said the lawyer, "we ought to apply to the nearest magistrate, and have them taken up and brought to justice. It is intolerable that such crimes should be committed with impunity."

"They'd blacked their faces," answered Rough, "and only one of 'em spoke, and he wasn't one of the two that talked to me in the morning. I doubt if I could swear to any of 'em, and, if I could, I don't know that I should care to do it. Poor devils! they hardly knowed what they were about. You see, sir, I meant 'em no ill, but they fancied I was their enemy, and had done 'em a deal of harm. They live all their lives among themselves, and talk to each other of their wrongs, till it almost drives 'em mad. And they never hear a good word from any one else. Most of those who come to speak to 'em, and the only ones they care to listen to, are politicians and such like chaps, who have their own ends to answer in making 'em discontented, and setting one class against another. I'm a poor man myself, and I've knowed what it is to want a meal, and how it sours the blood, and makes one think ill of one's neighbours. If God gave me sense enough to see that it wasn't the fault of other people—and if He sent me kind friends in time of need, such as Master Vaughan here, and the parson at



Aldersleigh, to show me I wasn't quite alone in the world—I ought to be thankful, and not be too hard on others who never had such a chance. Let the poor beggars go! I dare say they're glad enough by this time that they didn't kill me outright."

"You are a generous fellow, Rough," exclaimed the lawyer, "although I think you are wrong in this instance. But, having borne poverty so well, let us see how you will bear a change of fortune. I have something to tell you."

Then Mr. Strong repeated all that has been told in the last chapter, and explained fully to Jack the nature of his title to the estate. It was long before the latter could comprehend or credit so strange a story, and, when he began to realise the truth, it seemed to be with a feeling of astonishment rather than pleasure.

"I knowed my mother's name was Vaughan," he said at length, "but I always thought she belonged to Herefordshire people. To be sure, I *have* heard her talk of the hop-pickings in Kent, and how she'd been to London when a child.

And Master Vaughan's name, you see, and the Squire's, came natural to me, because it was the same as hers—but I never so much as dreamt of our being kinsfolk. And you really mean to say that I could take the old Squire's place, and live up at the Hall, and have the land for my own self, and all the great trees in the park?"

"Certainly," replied the lawyer. "I believe your title to be unimpeachable, and that you are Squire of Aldersleigh as truly as I am Samuel Strong."

"And a precious pretty squire I shall make!" cried Rough, with a sudden burst of laughter. "And it's all mine, you say, just as that old coat's mine, and I can do what I like with it?"

"Yes; it is yours absolutely."

"That's all right, then," said Rough, with a visible change of manner, "and I'm much obliged to you, sir, for the trouble you've had in making it out. But, if it's mine, the sooner I get it the better!"

Mr. Strong was as much surprised at this unexpected eagerness as he had been at the former

apparent indifference ; but he argued that the movements of a wholly undisciplined mind are not easy to follow, and made no remark on the subject.

“If you are strong enough to travel,” he said, “there is no reason why we should not go over to St. Mary’s to-morrow, and take the first steps to obtain possession of Aldersleigh. Before I left town, I sent an abstract of the title, with copies of all the proofs, to Mr. Sharp’s office in London ; and, if he is there, he will no doubt write immediately to Mr. Higgins, or go down to see him. They may give us some trouble, but they cannot resist our case.”

“We must all travel together,” said Rough, decisively. “And I don’t see why we should wait till to-morrow. I’m quite well enough to set out to-day.”

Accordingly, that afternoon they started on the road to St. Mary’s, and arrived at the Vicarage about night-fall. It may be imagined how warmly they were welcomed by Dr. Goodenough and the three girls, and how much they had

to relate of the adventures of the last few weeks.

Reginald was anxious to render full justice to George's share in the late transactions, and enlarged on his valuable assistance in the encounter with the brickmakers. But the younger Strong was determined to treat the whole affair as a joke.

"You would have laughed to see Reginald rush to the attack," he said; "it was like Don Quixote tilting against the windmills; and, as for my uncle, his voice rang out like Roland's horn at the battle of Roncesvalles. It was the jolliest game I ever had in my life."

"Game or no game," interposed Jack, resolutely, "it would have been all up with me if you hadn't come in the nick of time. It was touch and go, I can tell you, ladies."

"We will not dispute about our respective merits," said Mr. Strong. "I have no doubt we all acted like knights and paladins, and deserved well of our country. Let the fair honour the brave, and give us a cup of tea!"

"My dear Mary, what are we thinking of?" cried the hospitable Vicar. "We have been so much interested in their story, that we have quite forgotten our friends are just arrived from a journey. Let us have tea directly, and tell Susan to bring whatever there is in the larder."

When Susan came in with the tea-things, Jack gave her a smile and nod of recognition, and, on her departure, seemed half-inclined to follow her to the kitchen. But the Vicar pressed him to take his place at the table, and, with some little shyness, he sat down between Mary and her father. Reginald was on Mary's other side, and Mr. Strong opposite to the Vicar; while George ensconced himself between his fair cousins, and allowed them to butter his toast and help him to jam and marmalade.

"Poor boy!" said Charlotte; "he shall have some sweets, he shall, after all his pretty behaviour!"

"But our great baby will not care for sweets," said Emma, "now that he is growing up into a man."

"My dear cousins," replied George, "it is very pleasant to be a baby, as long as you have nice nurses and plenty of sugarplums. I have no ambition to get older or wiser."

And so they began to talk nonsense, and were all very merry together. But, in their hearts, the three girls felt proud and happy, that those who were near and dear to them had borne themselves like men in the late contest, and come out victorious from the strife.

## CHAPTER XXV.

## THE BUBBLE BURSTS.

MR. HIGGINS was sitting alone in the library at Aldersleigh in a somewhat sulky mood. He had taken too much wine the night before, his wife was in a bad temper, and his unruly children had been more than usually troublesome that morning. He had a vague consciousness that he was disliked by his neighbours, and more or less despised by his own servants. Even that gifted lady, his sister-in-law—though she did him the honour to ask him for money whenever she wanted it—appeared to look down on him with something very like contempt. His wealth had not brought him all the advantages

he expected, and he felt indignant accordingly, and ready to quarrel with mankind.

The post came in, and he began slowly and wearily to open his letters. The Tom Higgins of old had at all events been a man of active habits, who took pleasure in his business, and went cheerfully to work in his counting-house. But Mr. Higgins of Aldersleigh seemed to have lost all interest for affairs.

"I wish they wouldn't bother me with such a lot of letters," he grumbled. "Want my vote and interest. Hope I shall subscribe to the charity. Hang their charities!—Jamaica Committee. Take the chair at a Reform Meeting. Funds required for the League. I wish they may get any more out of me, that's all!—And here's a letter from old Slow," he added, tossing one of the epistles to the other end of the table. "I don't think I'll open it, for I know what's in it already. Nothing but complaints of Smooth, and croakings about the business. But I wonder Sharp hasn't written about the Chancery suit. If I could plague that confounded parson, it would be



worth any amount of expense and trouble. And if Sharp won't do it, I must find another lawyer who will."

While Mr. Higgins was indulging in these amiable reflections, a servant entered the room, and announced Mr. Strong and Mr. George Strong.

"Ha! ha!" said Higgins, with a malicious grin; "Sharp has been at them, I see, and they are come to beg for terms. I'll work them before I've done with them, and try if I can't fret the flesh off their bones. Show the gentlemen in, Robert."

"May I ask," said Mr. Strong, after the first civilities, "if you have received any communication from Mr. Sharp?"

"No. But *you* have, I suppose, and to that I am indebted for this visit. I may tell you at once that I shall not consent to any compromise. If the suit is begun, it will have to go on to the end. It is all owing, you know, to the Vicar's pig-headed obstinacy."

"I do not understand to what you are alluding, Mr. Higgins. We have commenced no suit, and

hope there will be no occasion for hostile measures. Our title is so clear, that we trust you will give up the estate without litigation."

"Give up the estate! What the devil do you mean?" cried Higgins.

"I see you have *not* heard from Mr. Sharp," said the lawyer, coolly. "With your permission, I will read you a brief statement of the case, which my nephew here can confirm in all particulars. When we have finished, you will be able to judge what are your chances of holding the property."

And, in a singularly concise and lucid exposition of facts, Mr. Strong proceeded to show the validity of Rough's claim to Aldersleigh.

Mr. Higgins listened to him, first with astonishment, then with impatience, and at last with savage fury.

"It's a lie!" he shouted, starting from his seat, and beginning to pace the room from end to end. "It's a base, infernal lie, got up to rob me and my children of our rights. But I'll indict you all for a conspiracy, like swindlers and forgers as you are!"

"Stop a minute," said George, taking out his pocket-book. "Will you oblige me by repeating those words, and giving me time to write them down? And, perhaps, it might be as well to call in some of the servants as witnesses. To charge people with swindling and forgery is actionable at common law—is it not so, uncle?"

"Leave my house, both of you," cried Higgins, "and never let me see your faces again!"

"Very well, sir," said Strong, rising to depart. "I had wished to avoid scandal, and to settle this matter amicably. Even now, I shall take no further steps until you have had time for consideration. I should advise you to consult Mr. Sharp."

And the lawyer was moving towards the door, when it was suddenly opened from the other side, and Mr. Sharp himself entered the library.

"You here!" exclaimed Higgins. "Well, you have just arrived at the right moment. Did you know that an attempt was being made to dispute my title to this property?"

"I have come down from London to see you on that and other matters," answered his legal ad-

viser. "I hope you are quite well, Mr. Strong ; and your nephew, too ; I think I have had the pleasure of meeting him before. It must have been at my friend Johnson's."

"Hang your friend Johnson !" growled Higgins. "What has that to do with this conspiracy to rob me of my property ?"

"Will you be kind enough to retire to another apartment ?" continued Sharp, still addressing himself to the two Strongs. "I must have some confidential talk with my client ; but do not leave the house, as we may wish to speak with you further."

"What do you mean by that ?" asked Higgins, when the Strongs had quitted the room. "Are *you* going to encourage their pretensions ?"

"I fear they have an overwhelming case ; but that is not the most pressing question at present. Have you no letters from Liverpool ?"

"There is one from old Slow, which I did not think it worth while to open."

"Then you have not heard of the stoppage of the bank ?"

All the blood left the florid cheeks of Mr. Higgins, and he stood staring at the lawyer with an expression of stupefied dismay.

"It is impossible," he said, at length. "I must have heard it from Smooth."

"I had a telegram last night," continued Sharp, "from my correspondent in Liverpool. Great defalcations had just been discovered. Puff, the manager, was off with an enormous sum. The doors will be closed this morning."

"And Smooth was to keep watch upon Puff," cried Higgins, "and inform me of his slightest movements! What does it all mean?"

He rushed to the table, and tore open his partner's letter. The intelligence contained therein was even worse than the news already received. The house of Higgins and Co. was as deeply involved as the bank. Both must necessarily stop payment. Mr. Smooth and Mr. Puff were supposed to have gone to America together.

The letter dropped from his trembling fingers, and he sank back into a chair, the picture of helpless consternation.

"It is ruin!—absolute ruin!" he whimpered. "What am I to do, Sharp? Tell me, what am I to do?"

"Make the best of it, I should think," replied the little lawyer, with a glance of covert scorn at his client. "It is clear, Mr. Higgins, that you will be the mark shot at. As Chairman of the Bank, Member of Parliament, and capitalist, they will all be down upon you. The liability is unlimited, and you know the transactions must be very large. I should advise you to withdraw to the Continent, until we have time to see how affairs stand, and to come to an arrangement, if possible." •

"And Aldersleigh?—what is to become of Aldersleigh?"

"If it were yours, it would probably fall into the hands of your creditors. But it is not yours, and you cannot keep it. Possession may be nine points of the law, but you cannot afford to play that game at present. Your only winning card is to do the thing handsomely, and to get some little popularity for what you could not help doing in

the end. Of course, I shall look carefully into the title, and examine all the vouchers; but, if it should turn out as I anticipate, let me make the best settlement I can with Strong, and give up the place at once to the rightful owner."

"You talk pretty coolly about giving up," said Higgins. "It's not *your* house and land, and so I suppose you don't care. But I think you have had enough of my money, Sharp, to show a little more feeling."

"I am not aware, Mr. Higgins, that I have had any of your money, except what I have earned by professional services, and those, I hope, have been faithfully performed. Just now, I am advising you to the best of my judgment, without much prospect of being paid for it."

"Oh, never fear! you will be paid fast enough. Whoever else goes to the wall, the lawyers are sure to help themselves."

"Let us understand each other, if you please, Mr. Higgins. For the sake of old acquaintance, I am willing to assist you in your difficulties; but if you do not require my services, you have only

to say so, and I will wash my hands at once of the whole concern."

"The cur!" muttered Higgins between his teeth. "Yesterday he would have licked my boots, and now he is ready to bark at me, and bite me, if occasion offers. But it will not do to quarrel with him. You must not leave me, my dear Sharp," he added aloud; "I have nobody but you to depend on, and you have always had my entire confidence. What is the first thing to be done?"

"The first thing, in my opinion," said Sharp, "is for you to get into the fly that brought me from Malvern, to take the train to London, and to embark for France. When you are out of the country, the creditors both of the bank and the firm will have to listen to reason."

"And Mrs. H. and the children?"

"When you are gone, the ladies and children may follow at their leisure. If I am to act for you in this emergency, you must give me full powers to treat on your behalf."

"Certainly, certainly, my dear Sharp! You know what a high esteem I have for you, and how



much I value your friendship, and all that sort of thing."

"Oh, yes! I know," said Sharp, laconically. "You had better see Mrs. Higgins, and pack your travelling-bag. In the meantime, I will come to terms with Strong."

And leaving his client to chew the cud of his reflections, and vent his spite in vain and impotent maledictions, Mr. Sharp went out in search of his brother lawyer.

He found the Strongs walking on the terrace, and at once addressed them in the most conciliatory tone. His client would be the last man in the world to resist a *just* claim; but he had been a little upset by the suddenness of the application, and the matter was too important not to subject the evidence to the closest scrutiny. He (Mr. Sharp) had the most implicit confidence in any statement made by Mr. Strong, but his duty required him to examine the original vouchers, and to test the proofs by further local inquiries. If Mr. Rough's title should be ultimately established, Mr. Strong would, no doubt, advise such

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"You here!" exclaimed Higgins. "Well, you have just arrived at the right moment. Did you know that an attempt was being made to dispute my title to this property?"

"I have come down from London to see you on that and other matters," answered his legal ad-

he expected, and he felt indignant accordingly, and ready to quarrel with mankind.

The post came in, and he began slowly and wearily to open his letters. The Tom Higgins of old had at all events been a man of active habits, who took pleasure in his business, and went cheerfully to work in his counting-house. But Mr. Higgins of Aldersleigh seemed to have lost all interest for affairs.

"I wish they wouldn't bother me with such a lot of letters," he grumbled. "Want my vote and interest. Hope I shall subscribe to the charity. Hang their charities!—Jamaica Committee. Take the chair at a Reform Meeting. Funds required for the League. I wish they may get any more out of me, that's all!—And here's a letter from old Slow," he added, tossing one of the epistles to the other end of the table. "I don't think I'll open it, for I know what's in it already. Nothing but complaints of Smooth, and croakings about the business. But I wonder Sharp hasn't written about the Chancery suit. If I could plague that confounded parson, it would be

worth any amount of expense and trouble. And if Sharp won't do it, I must find another lawyer who will."

While Mr. Higgins was indulging in these amiable reflections, a servant entered the room, and announced Mr. Strong and Mr. George Strong.

"Ha! ha!" said Higgins, with a malicious grin; "Sharp has been at them, I see, and they are come to beg for terms. I'll work them before I've done with them, and try if I can't fret the flesh off their bones. Show the gentlemen in, Robert."

"May I ask," said Mr. Strong, after the first civilities, "if you have received any communication from Mr. Sharp?"

"No. But *you* have, I suppose, and to that I am indebted for this visit. I may tell you at once that I shall not consent to any compromise. If the suit is begun, it will have to go on to the end. It is all owing, you know, to the Vicar's pig-headed obstinacy."

"I do not understand to what you are alluding, Mr. Higgins. We have commenced no suit, and

and get his costs. Then Mr. Higgins will return from his tour on the Continent, and keep his seat in Parliament to the last possible moment. I suppose the plate, and the carriages, and the gaudy furniture will have to be sold off, and the large house in town must be given up. But after a while Mr. Higgins will be comfortably established at Brighton or Leamington, and you will hear of his quiet dinners and unpretending equipage, as if it was a wonderful merit in such a man to bear himself so meekly. And Mrs. Higgins will be as great as ever on education, and Miss Jay on the rights of women. And, when they are old enough, those dear children will have a governess (the daughter of some clergyman, or physician, or gallant officer) kindly selected from one of the many families their father has ruined. And Master Tom will laugh heartily at her pale cheeks, and Miss Lizzie will make rare fun of her scanty wardrobe."

"If they do," cried the indignant Charlotte, "I hope she will whip them soundly."

"I fear they will have no such luck," replied



"Stop a minute," said George, taking out his pocket-book. "Will you oblige me by repeating those words, and giving me time to write them down? And, perhaps, it might be as well to call in some of the servants as witnesses. To charge people with swindling and forgery is actionable at common law—is it not so, uncle?"

"Leave my house, both of you," cried Higgins, "and never let me see your faces again!"

"Very well, sir," said Strong, rising to depart. "I had wished to avoid scandal, and to settle this matter amicably. Even now, I shall take no further steps until you have had time for consideration. I should advise you to consult Mr. Sharp."

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"I have come down from London to see you on that and other matters," answered his legal ad-

remembrances of a patient and long-suffering generation."

"Let us hope for better things," said the charitable Vicar. "Let us hope that sorrow and disappointment may bear their natural fruit, and make him wiser and more humble."

"My dear Goodenough," replied Strong, "there are some men in the world on whom joy and sorrow are alike thrown away. Their hearts cannot be opened by the one, or touched by the other; and for this simple reason—they have no hearts!"

Here Reginald and George came in from their morning stroll, and when they had heard the news, and made their comments upon it, they resolved to go at once to communicate the intelligence to Jack Rough.

"We shall find him on the bench in front of the 'Blue Boar,'" said Reginald. "There he sits and thinks, while waiting for the decision as to Aldersleigh. We could not get him to come up to the Vicarage this morning. He is so modest, that he always fancies he is intruding, and so

silent, that we hardly know whether he is elated or not by his prospects."

"I believe it will turn out," said the Vicar, "that Jack has one of the greatest of all gifts—a mind independent of circumstances, and equal to either fortune."

## CHAPTER XXVI.

## JACK IN POSSESSION.

THERE was no long delay with regard to the ownership of Aldersleigh. When Mrs. Higgins and her sister had left for France, taking with them nurses to attend on the children, and maids to wait on themselves, in the orthodox style of a bankrupt family of distinction, the other servants were dismissed, the horses and carriages sent away to London, and the shutters closed at the Hall. Then Mr. Sharp intimated to Mr. Strong that, being unable to resist the evidence of Mr. Rough's title to the estate, and thinking it expedient to anticipate the action of any of the creditors of Mr. Higgins, he was quite ready to yield possession, on certain conditions as to his own charges.

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These were agreed to (after some remonstrances from Mr. Strong, which produced a slight diminution in the amount), and a day was fixed for giving up the property. At the appointed time, Rough and his friends proceeded to Aldersleigh, and received the keys from the versatile Sharp, who then took his departure with many expressions of esteem and friendship. The first act of the new owner was to deliver these keys to Mrs. Sutton, the old housekeeper, and to place everything in her custody, and that of William, who had been summoned by letter to resume his former post at the Hall.

“And you’ll write to Morris, Mr. Strong,” he said, “as you promised me, and get him to come and take charge of the farm and the land?”

“I have done so already,” answered the lawyer, “and I hope we may see him before many hours are over. And now, my dear Mr. Rough, let me congratulate you on the complete success of our operations. You have recovered the property with far less trouble than might have been expected.”

"Thanks to you, sir," said Jack, with a quiet smile. "And now, I suppose, you think I mean to keep it, and to live here at this big house, and dine off gold and silver? But you little know Jack Rough, if you fancy that's his notion of life. I should never be comfortable in these large rooms, and I don't want to be waited on, and I hate forms and ceremonies. I've not been used to 'em, you see, and they wouldn't suit me, and I should only feel like a fish out of water. I'm not fit to be master of such a place as this."

"But you wanted to get the property, Jack?" said Reginald.

"That's true. And I may have had my reasons, you know. But I never meant to make a fool of myself, like Mr. Higgins. I never meant to force my company on my betters, like a jackass in a field of hunters, or to stick myself up to be laughed at, like a clown at a fair. Besides, I've been used to work all my life, and idleness would kill me in six months. The long and the short of it is, that the Squire of Aldersleigh ought to be a gentleman, and nothing at all like me in looks,

or manners, or learning. I'm a very ignorant fellow, but I've sense enough to see that."

"But, my dear Jack," said Reginald, "you have more mother-wit than half the gentlemen in the country, and you would soon learn what is becoming in your new station. You would have Mr. Strong and the Vicar to advise you; and many a man of birth and breeding, who turned away with contempt from the impudence of Mr. Higgins, would hold out the right hand of friendship to a simple, honest fellow like you. Besides, you may marry, and have children, and you can educate them, you know, to fit them for any rank."

"You'd have me marry a fine lady, I suppose," replied Rough, "who'd blush to be seen with me abroad, and find fault with all my ways and habits at home? Why, bless you! I couldn't keep my hands clean enough to please her. And none such would have me, except for the sake of the estate; and *my* fancy's to choose a girl that would like me a little for myself. And, as for children, I'd wish 'em to learn some things that I

never knew, and be able to get on just a trifle better in the world; but, to my way of thinking, one step's enough at a time; and I don't want 'em to go so fast as to be ashamed of their father and mother, and turn up their noses at plain living and honest labour."

"What then do you mean to do, and where are you going?" asked the Vicar.

"I'm going back to the 'Blue Lion' for the present, sir," answered Jack, "and perhaps, when Morris comes, I may take a room at the farm. I'm having a holiday now, but I shall soon set to work again. I can't settle for good until I've disposed of the estate."

"Disposed of the estate!" cried Mr. Strong, in amazement.

"Why, yes, sir; didn't you tell me I could do as I liked with it? I shouldn't have cared to claim it if it hadn't been for that. And now I mean to sell it as soon as possible. But there's only one man in the world I mean to sell it to, and here he is, and his name's Vaughan."



"But, my dear Jack," said Reginald, "I have not sufficient money to buy it."

"I suppose you've got a thousand pound?" said Rough, doubtfully.

"Yes, certainly, I have a thousand pounds and more; but Aldersleigh must be worth at least fifty times that sum."

"Never mind," said Jack; "that's my price."

"You don't know what you are talking about, my dear fellow. It would be a downright robbery to accept your offer."

"I know very well what I'm talking about. You ought to have Aldersleigh, for the old Squire meant you to have it, and you've got the old name, and you're the right man for the place. As for money, if you gave me nothing for it, do you think I could ever pay what I owe to you? And, after all, do you know what a thousand pound means to a man like me? Why, it means a snug cottage, with a tight roof over one's head, and food, and clothes, and comfort, without working one's heart out; and rest in sickness, and ease of mind in bad times; and a bench in the sun, or

a warm chimney-corner in one's old age, where one may smoke one's pipe without fear of coming on the parish. What more do you think I want to make me as happy as a king?"

"I understand the delicacy of your motives, Jack," said Reginald, "and I feel your generosity more than I can express. But I cannot accept your offer."

"You had better try *me*, Rough," said George; "I don't think I should be quite so particular."

"You must wait till I get another estate," answered Jack, laughing. "This one's for Reginald Vaughan, and I mean him to have it, whether it's a month, or a year, or ten years hence. It's no use talking about it any more; but I'll just tell you what I mean to do. I shall leave Mrs. Sutton to take care of the house, and Morris to manage the land, and all the rents will be paid to Mr. Strong; and I shall draw twenty shillings a week for myself, and go about my own work in my own way. All the rest will remain as it is, till Master Vaughan chooses to buy the

property; and, if Aldersleigh's left without a Squire, it's *his* fault, and not *mine*."

Nothing could move Rough from this determination, though much more was said on the way back to the village. On arriving there, he declined going to the Vicarage with the others, and preferred returning alone to the 'Blue Lion.' His friends parted from him with regret, but held it expedient not to interfere with his humour.

"We must give him time," said Dr. Good-enough, when they reached the Vicarage. "He is still shy in his intercourse with people whom he thinks superior to himself. I hope he will get more at his ease in that respect, but I do not wish for any other change in him. He is one of the noblest fellows in existence."

"He is certainly a rare specimen of humanity," answered Strong, "and I believe he is wiser in his estimate of what would conduce to his own happiness than most educated people would be under the same circumstances. I believe he will be altogether happier and more respectable, by

remaining in a station not far removed from his original place in society, than by attempting to adopt the manners and habits of quite a different class. And, seriously, I do not see why Reginald should reject his offer. Life and health and safety are, after all, more valuable than house and land; he thinks he owes the former to our friend here, and he wishes to give him the latter in return. There is nothing in the transaction that would not be creditable to both of them; and sometimes there may be more real magnanimity in accepting than in refusing a favour."

"I should be quite willing to accept a favour from Jack Rough," said Reginald. "I know it would be freely given, and might be taken in the same spirit. But here is something more than a common favour. I am asked to purchase a large property at a nominal price, so that I may appear to the world as an ordinary buyer, and not even feel the obligation of a gift."

"You need not be content with paying him the thousand pounds," continued the lawyer; "you might charge the estate with a sufficient annuity

to put him and his family beyond the reach of want. I see nothing objectionable in such an arrangement, and for you to take the property would only be carrying out the views of the old Squire."

"I have already said," answered Reginald, "that I should be quite willing to receive a kindness from Rough. If it were only a question of buying the estate for less than its value, I should not be scrupulous about the exact amount. But here the difference is too great. If I were to accede to such a proposal as this, men would be justified in believing that I had traded on a poor fellow's inexperience, and taken advantage of his generosity."

"I think Reginald is right," said the Vicar. "A man's honour is like a woman's chastity; it should not only be pure, but unsuspected."

"That is all very fine," replied the lawyer, "but perhaps a little quixotic. If Reginald does what is best for Rough's happiness and his own, with the approval of his friends, and the consent of all parties concerned, why need he trouble him-

self about the opinions of people who have nothing on earth to do with it?"

"Let it be, then," said Reginald, "that I cannot reconcile it to my own feelings. In this matter, I can ask no counsel but from my inward sense of what is right and seemly. If I were to act otherwise, I should forfeit my self-respect."

"Of course, I have not a word more to say on the subject," returned Mr. Strong; "but what a splendid fellow this Jack Rough is! A man who has known all the privations of poverty, and yet looks so calmly on the wealth within his grasp, that he regards it chiefly as the means of discharging a debt of gratitude; who has never envied the rich, or been servile to the great, or insolent to any one, whether high or low; who has borne adversity without flinching, and who, in the face of a sudden, unexpected prosperity, is content with his own rank in life, and wise enough not to wish to change it. Such a man makes one proud of one's country."

"And believe me, there are many such," cried the Vicar; "and in them lies the hope of Eng-

land, in the midst of all the dangers I have heard you so eloquently deplore. If I thought that the main body of the people was infected by the wild, restless, irreverent, revolutionary spirit, which is to be found amongst a portion of the working classes, I should indeed despair of our political future. But I know that there are thousands and thousands of poor, honest, humble men, to whom the demagogues and the neologists would alike address themselves in vain; men who fear God, honour the Queen, and live peaceably with all their neighbours, and of whom it may yet be said in the language of our old Catechism, that they bear no malice nor hatred in their hearts; that they neither covet nor desire other men's goods; but learn and labour truly to get their own living, and to do their duty in that state of life unto which it has pleased God to call them."

"I hope there are still such Englishmen," said Mr. Strong, "and that they may never be improved off the face of the earth by the crotchets of enlightened philanthropy or new systems of secular education. But I fear they are few in

number, and that they are getting fewer every day."

"You cannot judge by the artisans in great towns," replied the Vicar, "any more than by the half-savage tribes which hang upon the outskirts of civilisation. The one set are too often guided and governed by knaves and adventurers, the other by their own vices and passions, and both of late have been guilty of excesses which are altogether foreign to our ordinary habits and feelings. But scattered over the length and breadth of the land—not only in agricultural districts, but in all the various fields of productive industry—there are numbers of men to be found who, in heart and mind, as well as in thews and sinews, are still essentially English; who can neither be cajoled by flattery nor intimidated by threats, and who view with a just scorn the attempts of selfish agitators to sow the seeds of suspicion and discord between themselves and their employers. These are the men who maintain the character of their race, not by noise and clamour, or loud talk about rights and privileges, but by a steady performance



of their duties, unremitting labour, and resolute endurance; and these are they whose daily and hourly practice of self-control and self-denial, unconscious of merit, and without a spark of pretence or affectation, might well set an example to any class in the community :

‘ And, oh ! may Heaven their simple lives prevent  
From luxury’s contagion weak and vile !  
That, howe’er crowns and coronets be rent,  
A virtuous populace may rise the while,  
And stand a wall of fire around their much-loved isle ! ’ ”

“ I hope to Heaven it may be so ! ” cried Strong, with much fervour ; “ but I confess that my heart sometimes fails me, when I think of the combination of fools and philosophers against the peace and happiness of these honest men.”

“ I tell you what it is, uncle,” said George : “ if one of our undergraduates were to hear you talk in this way about the philosophers, he would certainly call you a Philistine.”

“ And I should tell him, in return, that he was using the old weapon against Philistines—the jawbone of an ass. So there I think I should have the better of him, Master George.”

They all laughed at this, and, tea being served, the conversation became more general. When the repast was finished, Reginald proposed a walk in the garden. It was late in the year, but the weather was still fine, and there was a bright moon that evening. The two elder gentlemen preferred sitting down to a game of chess, and Emma excused herself on account of a cold. But the rest tripped lightly over the glittering lawn, and, dividing into separate pairs, began to pace up and down the gravel-path beyond, sometimes in the moonlight and sometimes in the shadow of the laurels.

"I must leave you again to-morrow, Mary," said Reginald; "I hope you approve of what I have done about Aldersleigh?"

"I am sure you were right, dear," she answered. "We could not allow poor Jack to make such a sacrifice; but I shall always love and honour him for his kind intentions."

"It was a sore temptation though, Mary—not the fields and woods—not even the old home of my forefathers, which I have dreamt of from

childhood, but the possibility of our getting married immediately. It might have added some years of happiness to our lives."

"We are very happy now, dear," said Mary, looking up in his face. "As long as we fully trust each other, we can afford to wait."

"God bless you, my love!" he answered, as he bent fondly over her. "You have inherited the bright, hopeful, contented spirit of your father, and God grant I may never do anything to dim its lustre!"

"I wish somebody would offer *me* an estate!" said George to Charlotte, at the other end of the walk. "I shouldn't refuse it, I can assure you."

"What use could you make of it, George? You couldn't smoke more than so many cigars in the day."

"That's true. But I might give up smoking and take to something else."

"You might do that now if you liked."

"I am thinking of doing it. To tell you the truth, Charlotte, I am getting tired of the sort of life I have led. The little taste of work I have

had lately seemed to me rather pleasant. But I want some young woman to take charge of me, and put me into regular training."

"You had better look out for one, George."

"Couldn't you help me to find one, Charlotte?"

"What have I to do with it? How am I to know the kind of girl you would fancy?"

"Couldn't you give a guess, Charlotte? You remember how you used to bully me about Miss Forbes when I came home from Eton for the holidays?"

"Well, but Miss Forbes is married, and has six children; so that's out of the question."

"And you know very well I never cared for her. It was all your nonsense. We were fast friends in those days, Charlotte."

"I hope we are so still. And if you will describe exactly the young woman you require, I will see if I cannot find such a phoenix amongst my acquaintance."

"She must be a good-natured girl, of course," replied George, "or she would never put up with me. She must have sufficient energy for herself

and her husband too, and wit enough to discover his faults, and sense enough to hide them from other people. She may be a little hasty, and pitch into me herself, if she likes ; but then she must let nobody else do it, and have courage to take my part against the world. She must not be too exacting, or over-nice about trifles ; not grave, or sullen, or affected, or too literal to understand a joke ; but simple and natural in all things, and honest and true. If I could find such a wife, I do not say I should make her a good husband, but I would try to do so ; and, at all events, she would make me a much better fellow than I have been."

"That is saying a great deal for her, and nothing for yourself, George. But you have not told me what she must be like in other respects."

"About your size, and height, and face, and figure, my dear cousin. And, now, you must really listen to me quietly for five minutes. I have talked so much folly in my life, that, when I want to be serious for once, I suppose it will be like the cry of 'Wolf' in the fable, and nobody will believe I am in earnest. And yet I am very

deeply in earnest, I assure you, and therefore I cannot talk half so glibly as usual. You know as much of my imperfections as most people, and also what little good there is in me. Our friendship dates from the time of frocks and pinafores, and if I were the veriest humbug in the universe, I could not attempt to deceive you about anything. Such as I am, you know me thoroughly, Charlotte. Would it be possible for you to take me for better or worse, and see what you could make of me?"

She was silent for a few moments, but, when she answered, it was with a frank smile and cheerful voice.

"I am not sure that I knew you thoroughly, George, until quite lately. Of course, I always liked my old friend and playmate, and felt certain there was more in him than people thought. But you had so effectually concealed your good qualities, that I almost began to fear they would never show themselves again. Now I have confidence in you, and plenty of hope for the future. With regard to our marrying—well, it must depend

upon yourself. I am not going to blush and simper, or play off the little airs of our sex, or tell you I must ask papa. I know my own mind, and that my dear father would do anything in his power to make me happy. But I cannot take a husband as I would a pet spaniel, to train up to my ways and fancies ; I must have one of the old sort, whom I can love, honour, and obey. You may laugh at that, George ; but we women like to look *up*, not down. So if you will keep to your resolution, and leave off wasting your time, and work steadily at your profession, and fight your battle with the world as manfully as with the brickmakers—and if, when you have done all this, you have still a soft place in your heart for me, and think me worthy of your regard—why, then I may listen to what you have to say, and there's my hand upon the bargain !”

Of course, he kissed the fair hand extended to him, and protested his unalterable fidelity in lover-like fashion. But it was impossible for those two to remain long in a sentimental mood, and, before they returned to the house, they were laughing

and teasing each other just in the old style. No one could have told from their manner that they had that night taken a serious step in life; but Emma heard it from her sister while they were brushing their hair, and George confided it to Reginald as they walked back to the 'Blue Lion.'

The next morning, Mr. Strong and his friends prepared to return to London, and, going to bid farewell to Jack Rough, found him in the fields with Morris, and already hard at work at hedging and ditching. He seemed to be in high spirits, and was singing merrily over his self-imposed task.

"We're all jolly now," he said, "that we've got Morris back to put things straight. We'll have the old place to rights again in no time. That Scotchman has been cutting down hedges, as if he was afraid to hear a bird sing. But he hasn't had time to do much mischief, and we'll have it all as green as ever before next summer."

"Glad to see you, sir," said Morris, touching his hat to Reginald, "and hope you'll soon take the estate for yourself."



"The estate belongs to my friend Mr. Rough, my dear Morris, and I have nothing to do with it."

"Ah, yes, sir! I know," returned Morris, with a cunning wink at Jack. "But the old Squire meant it to be yours, and yours it will be, sooner or later. There's no use fighting against Providence."

"That's just where it is," said Jack, dogmatically. "You was saved from wars and perils, and brought over from America, that you might have Aldersleigh, and keep up the old name. You wouldn't fly in the face of what's ordered, would you?"

"I must have some better proof of my manifest destiny," answered Reginald, laughing, "before I consent to act upon it. But we will not talk any more about this, at present. I have come to shake hands with you, Jack, before going to town. I hope to be here again at Christmas."

"I may take a holiday between this and then," said Rough, "and come up by the cheap train, to see Mr. Crosby at Bethnal Green, and the old lady

that knowed my mother and grandmother. If I do, I shall be sure to find you out somehow."

"If you do," said Reginald, warmly, "I hope you will come and stop with George and me at the Temple."

"That would hardly suit," replied Rough; "but thank you, all the same, for I know you mean it. There's a tidy house in Whitechapel, where I dare say I shall put up for a night or two. And, if the Cattle Show's going on, I should like to see that; and I can give you a call on my way back."

"You must come and dine with us, at all events," said George. "We will have it all snug and comfortable in chambers, and make a regular night of it!"

"And you must let me join you, my boys," cried Mr. Strong; "and I'll teach you how to brew whisky punch!"

"Is that one of the lost arts, uncle?"

"Nearly so. It went out with Toryism and sound principles. The two last great masters of the art were Professor Wilson and the Ettrick Shepherd."

"I'll be with you," said Rough, "please the pigs! You've spent black nights enough at my bed-side for us all to have a jolly night together, and no harm done. If I can't talk, I can sing you a song."

"That's a bargain then," said Reginald. "Let me have a line to name the day."

So they all shook hands at parting, and the three gentlemen walked back to the Vicarage, whilst the sturdy labourer went on toiling in the fields, which were now rightfully his own property, but which he had firmly resolved to make over to his benefactor. And no prouder or happier man stood on the soil of England that morning, than the brave, strong, indefatigable, large-hearted peasant, with the flush of exertion on his brown cheek, and the beads of sweat gathering on his sunburnt forehead.

"Are you girls coming with me to town?" asked Mr. Strong of his daughters. "Your mother will think you have quite deserted her."

"I am going with you, papa," answered Charlotte, "and I have everything packed and ready."

But Mary wants Emma to stop with her a little longer, and I hope mamma will have no objection."

"Settle it amongst yourselves," said Mr. Strong. "Fathers and mothers have only to register the behests of the new generation."

"You must promise, however," said the Vicar, "to pay us another visit at Christmas—Mrs. Strong and all. If we keep Emma as a hostage, we shall be the more sure of seeing you."

"What an unconscionable fellow you are, Good-enough!" replied his friend. "I suppose you would undertake to board and lodge us, all the year round. You are as unreasonable as Jack Rough, and as obstinate; but, in this world, obstinate people have their way, and patient, forbearing characters like myself have only to submit in silence."

## CHAPTER XXVII.

## THE CASKET.

A NEW life had begun in the chambers at the Temple. George and Reginald were now both hard at work, and the former astonished the latter by the perseverance and sagacity he displayed. He not only read a great deal, but regularly and systematically, and the sole recreation he indulged in was a frequent visit to Russell Square. Of course, the ingenuous Charlotte had opened her heart to her parents; and Mrs. Strong had kissed and congratulated her daughter with true motherly sympathy; and Mr. Strong had shaken his head, and talked about idle, improvident young men, and silly, thoughtless young women, but finished by giving

his consent and taking as much interest in the affairs of the lovers as they did themselves. In fact, he was really pleased with what had occurred, for he had always been fond of George, in spite of that young gentleman's foibles, and now he began to entertain good hopes of his future progress in his profession. For the rest, the worthy lawyer was singularly free from selfish or ambitious views, and all he desired for his children was a position of moderate comfort, and simple, domestic happiness.

The correspondence with the Vicarage continued as brisk as usual, and Mary had always some news to impart to Reginald.

"It is quite clear," she wrote, a few days after he had left her, "that nothing will move Jack Rough to quit the station in which he was born and bred, and now an event has happened which seems to be in accordance with that resolution. After working all day in the fields, he generally comes up to the Vicarage in the evening, and has a few minutes' chat with my father or me; but he never stays long, and I soon found that his visits

were not really to us. You know my little maid Susan. She is a very nice girl, as good as she is pretty, and was born in our village, and brought up at our school. Her parents were poor, and she was left an orphan very young, so that she looks upon this house as her home. Well, Susan came to me this morning, as red as a rosebud, and told me that Mr. Rough had asked her to marry him. She begged my permission to accept him, just as she would have done to go out for a holiday, and, although I hardly knew whether to laugh or cry at her simplicity, you may be sure I was truly glad, and congratulated her most sincerely. She will make him a good little wife, and he will be the most loving and tender of giants. Papa says, it will be Hercules married to Hebe."

In her next letter, Mary wrote :—

"I have now another piece of intelligence for you. Arthur Graham has arrived from India, invalided. You know he was one of my earliest friends ; in fact, we were like brother and sister. I was therefore very anxious when I heard of his

illness, but happily the voyage has in a great measure restored him to health, and it would do you good to see the delight of Mrs. Graham and dear Aunt Jane. Since they are secure in their cottage, and have their boy with them once more, they seem as if they had nothing on earth to wish for."

"And what do you think has happened now?" she added, a week or two later. "I scarcely know if I am justified in speaking of it to any one, but I can have no secrets from you, and after all it is very pleasant news. Arthur and Emma have seen a great deal of each other, and have become very intimate; and, in short, I have reason to believe that a strong attachment has sprung up between them, if they are not actually engaged. I shall be so glad if it all turns out well! It would be so nice to have two such old friends united!"

To all which Reginald answered:—

"I am afraid, my dear Mary, you are becoming a regular little match-maker. I suppose it is a weakness with women, and that when once they



have embarked on the voyage of matrimony, they are never easy till all their friends are in the same boat. Seriously, however, I shall be very glad if what you anticipate comes to pass. I like Emma Strong, partly because she is a good, sensible girl, partly because she is her father's daughter, but chiefly, I think, because she is so fond of you. As for the gentleman, I judge, from a remark Miss Prior let fall in my hearing, that he may once have regarded a certain young lady with something more than brotherly affection. If so, it is a proof of his excellent taste, and I can only wish him every success in his new enterprise."

About this time Jack Rough paid his promised visit to London, and was entertained at the Temple with all due hospitality. The dinner was sent in from a neighbouring tavern, and Mr. Strong was admitted to preside at the table. Jack gave them a full account of his interview with old Mrs. Laroche—or *Madame*, as she preferred being called, in virtue of her French origin—and related how she had shown him a locket, containing some of his grandfather's hair,

preserved through all those long, lonely, wearisome years by the one being who had loved and cherished his memory, and still worn close to the heart of that little, wizened, sharp-eyed octogenarian woman.

"She'll leave it to me when she dies," said Jack, "and I think it's the most precious thing she has in the world. She's a queer old body, but I couldn't help feeling it's something for a man to be loved like that. I wonder if any of us will have such luck."

"I hope so," replied Reginald, "and that we may deserve it better than your poor grandfather seems to have done."

"I am afraid," said Mr. Strong, "that women do not always love most the men who deserve it best—that is, they do not always make the wisest choice. But if they have once chosen, I think it is generally the man's fault if they do not remain faithful to the end."

"I suppose it's like hooking a salmon," said his nephew; "one must give them plenty of line, and not pull up too short."

"I beg you will not indulge in such unseemly similes, George," cried Reginald, laughing. "If you talk in that style to some people, you will certainly get your ears boxed."

"And now, young fellows," said Mr. Strong, "I am not going to be entertained with your love affairs all the evening. Of course we shall drink to sweethearts and wives after dinner, with all the honours. But, in the mean time, I propose we have a little rational conversation."

And very miscellaneous conversation it was, as might have been expected from the company, but genial and pleasant, and on the whole not deficient in wit or wisdom. Jack contributed his share in many original remarks on life and manners, Mr. Strong supplied the vigour and the irony, Reginald the enthusiasm, and George a running commentary of amusing banter. When the cloth was removed, they drew round the fire in merry mood, all perfectly at ease, and disposed to enjoy themselves thoroughly. The shyness which Jack felt in the society of educated men had gradually disappeared beneath the friendly

warmth of his reception, and by the time the whisky punch made its appearance he was in the full flow of good-fellowship, and as ready to talk as his companions.

"What do you think of the teetotallers, Rough?" said the old lawyer, as he handed the steaming goblets to his friends.

"Poor creatures, for the most part," replied Jack, "and rather weak in the upper story. Still, there's something to be said on both sides. Drink's the great curse of the working man, and if he'd learn to take less, it would be better for him and all belonging to him. But I don't think you'll ever do it, by treating him like a baby or an idiot that can't be trusted to handle edge-tools. What I want to see, if we are ever to get wiser, is, not a poor sneak of a fellow that can't keep himself sober without rules and vows, and is just as likely to break through 'em on the first temptation, but a man with a will, that can take his glass or leave it, as may be right and proper, and best for himself and family. Used in moderation, in due times and seasons, good liquor's as much

of a blessing as meat or bread, and we ought to be just as thankful for one as the other, and not find fault with God's gifts because Old Scratch and his imps may turn 'em to a bad purpose. So here's your health, gentlemen, and may we never be worse off than this evening !"

"And now for the song you promised us, Jack," said Reginald.

"I'll give you one that was made by a friend of mine," answered Rough. "He was a working mason, and used to sing as fast as he chipped the stones. It did one's heart good to hear him, and though he wasn't much of a poet, he had the knack of putting many men's thoughts into verse."

And throwing himself back in his chair, with the glass of whisky in his hand, he sang in a loud, clear voice, as follows :—

#### JACK ROUGH'S SONG.

As long as this world shall go round,  
And up to the end of our tether,  
Rich and poor face to face will be found,  
And still must be herded together ;

For no man can say in his pride  
That he ne'er will want help from a brother ;  
And classes in vain we divide  
When each stands in need of the other.  
And so, while there's freedom for all,  
And room both to take and to give in,  
And one law for great and for small,  
We're content with the land that we live in !  
With a hip ! hip ! hurrah !  
With a hip ! hip ! hurrah !  
And three cheers for the land that we live in !

I do not repine at my lot,  
Or talk like a rebel and traitor,  
Because 'tis but little I've got,  
And many are richer and greater.  
The merchant may boast of his pelf,  
The peer of his birth and his station,  
The scholar be proud of himself,  
The statesman of ruling the nation ;  
But he who must labour for bread,  
In whatever hard toil he engages,  
Let it be with his hands or his head,  
May rejoice in the work and the wages !  
With a hip ! hip ! hurrah !  
With a hip ! hip ! hurrah !  
And three cheers for the work and the wages !

And the Crown is our beacon so bright,  
Placed high o'er the reach of the billows,  
That the Ship of the State may go right,  
While we sleep secure on our pillows.

And the Queen who now graces the throne,  
Whom we honour above every other,  
In her life the true model has shown  
Of the woman, the wife, and the mother.  
In each joy that can gladden her heart,  
In each grief that may come to distress her,  
We feel we must all bear a part ;  
And here's health to Victoria!—God bless her !  
With a hip! hip! hurrah!  
With a hip! hip! hurrah!  
And three cheers for Victoria!—God bless her !

“That’s a very good song,” said the old lawyer,  
“and I hope such sentiments are popular amongst  
the working classes. From your experience,  
Rough, do you judge that the mass of the people  
are still loyal to the Queen?”

“Almost to a man,” replied Jack, “if you mean  
the real hard-working people of the country. I  
can’t speak for idle vagabonds, that go loafing  
about the doors of ginshops ; and here and there  
you may find a cockney tailor, or such like, that  
cares for nothing but the sound of his own penny  
whistle. They’re a poor lot, and of no account to  
any one. But the bulk of the people love their  
Queen. They may grumble against masters and

lords, and rich men generally, when things go wrong with 'em, and they don't well see who's in fault. But they know the Queen's their friend, and they'll stick to her as tight as wax. It wasn't the working men who talked like blackguards, because the first lady in the land took the loss of a good husband to heart, and couldn't get over it just in time to please the London shopkeepers. They loved her all the better for it, and they'll stand by her against men or devils. And if any Fenian doubts it, let him go to one of their meetings, and speak a word of insult about her Majesty, and if he don't come away with a bloody nose or a broken head, my name's not Jack Rough."

"I am delighted to hear it," said Mr. Strong. "I am sick of professions of faith, which sound more like sneers than earnest, and it's quite refreshing to meet with a bit of real, downright, old-fashioned loyalty. If I could but believe, Rough, that your opinions fairly represented those of the majority of the people, I should cease to have any fears for England."



"I don't care much about opinions," said Jack. "Men like me, who've had hardly any schooling, have to scramble for our opinions, and hold 'em in a queer kind of jumbling way. But we've our feelings the same as others, and it's feeling, I take it, which rules the world in the long run. Now if I know aught of English working men, they've some very strong feelings which are common to most of 'em. They don't like to be ordered about, or interfered with, and their backs are up in a minute at what they call dictation; and they're apt to be jealous and suspicious of people's intentions; but they've a great respect in their hearts for those above 'em, and, if ever that dies out, it's the fault of the higher classes. Let gentlemen treat 'em as one man likes to be treated by another; not preach to 'em, or bully 'em, or talk to 'em like the Grand Bashaw—much less flatter 'em, or fawn upon 'em, or tell lies in the hopes of pleasing 'em—and I'm much mistaken if they won't follow the gentlemen, just as our soldiers follow their officers in battle. Depend upon it, they can see through the Higginses, and that kind

of Brummagem ware ; and a man like my friend Vaughan here would carry their votes against a thousand."

While Jack was yet speaking, there came a knock at the door, and the lad who was dignified with the name of clerk having long ago been allowed to take his departure, Reginald went himself to open it. He was struck dumb with astonishment when he saw standing beneath the lamp in the passage, with a broad grin upon his countenance, the well-known figure of an old negro, whom he had last parted with in Virginia.

"Why, Sambo!" he exclaimed, at length ; "is it possible it can be you?"

"Yes, massa ; it's me, sure enough. Come all de way from ole Virginny to dis ere bitter cole country, and look fur you all ober dis ere tarnal big town, till I tink I nebber find you no more. But I'se got upon your tracks at last."

"My dear Sambo!" cried Reginald, embracing him ; "I am truly glad to see you, though not a little surprised. Come out of the cold, and then you shall tell me all about it."

Having hugged his old master till he nearly choked him, the negro followed joyfully into the warm, cheerful room, and, being introduced to the company, was soon seated by the fire, and supplied with a brimming glass of hot whisky punch.

"Nebber so comforable nowhere," he said, "since massa lef de ole place. Berry nice location dis ere, and berry good stuff to drink."

"Well, but how did you come over, Sambo?" asked Reginald.

"How me come cross de sea, massa? In a ship, to be sure. Work him way as cook, and dey nebber hab no such cooking before, I guess, in dem ere packets. 'Member my pumpkin-pie, massa?"

"I remember it perfectly, Sambo, and very good it was. But what could induce you to leave America?"

"Well, massa, couldn't put up wid de nonsense ob dem Yankees nohow. Dey berry ignorant people, dem Yankees, and no respec for nuffin. Tink derselves all as one as de ole famlies, and look down on spectable nigger like dirt. Den I

wants to see massa agen, and I hab one oder reason. Member de putty leetle box dat belong to ole massa?"

"What little box, Sambo?"

"Berry putty leetle box, all ober figures and flowers, dat stand up by derselves, and shine all de same as goold."

"You mean the Benvenuto casket, that contained the family jewels."

"Dat's it, massa; dat's de berry dential ting. When de war broke out, and you was all gwine to de army, ole massa go out at night wid spade, and dig deep hole, and hide dat leetle box under groun. He nebber come back no more, and when you was dere alone, you nebber could find de spot where to look fur it."

"Quite true, Sambo. I gave it up in despair. In fact, I was then so depressed by heavier losses, that I did not take much pains about it."

"But massa nebber furgit poor ole nigger," said Sambo, with sparkling eyes. "When he lef him home and all, gib poor ole Sambo cabin, and bit garden-groun, and tools, and seeds, and ebery-

ting. Dat nigger no hab to die fur want, or beg him bread ob de Yankees. So he kep quiet in dat ere plantation, and tink he nebber hab no chance to see massa's face agen. But he hab one fren to mind him ob de ole times. Member poor dog Ponto, massa?"

"Indeed I do, Sambo; and I only wish you had brought him with you. I would give a great deal to have him again."

"Dat can nebber be now," said the negro, shaking his woolly head. "After you go way, de poor beast pine, and pine, and pine, and put him black nose in ole nigger's hand, and look up in him face wid eyes dat ask fur massa. I nuss him like a chile, and after a bit he much better. But he nebber like dem Yankees, and growl, and growl, whenebber he see dem fellows; and one day some ob dem white trash shoot de poor dog, and he only crawl home to die at ole nigger's feet. So I wraps him up in dat ere flag, all torn to tatters, what massa bring wid him from de wars—cos poor Ponto die all de same as in battle, fur de honour ob ole Virginnny—and when de moon

git up at night, I goes out fur to bury him. I digs him grave between two tall trees, dat me allays know de place agen, and I digs it berry deep, dat no Yankee ebber meddle wid him bones ; and as I digs, and digs, de spade strike upon somefin hard. So I clears him all roun, till I comes to one big wooden box, and fetches him out ob de groun in no time. And when I'se done bury poor Ponto, I takes dis ere box to dis ere nigger's cabin, and dere I opens him. And what should be inside but anoder leetle box, all shiny like goold, and de berry dential same as belong to poor ole massa."

"And what have you done with it, Sambo?"

"What me done wid him? What dis nigger done wid massa's box? Kep him safe, to be sure, and hab him here dis moment."

And therewith he thrust his hand into his bosom, and produced a casket of fine Italian workmanship, which he delivered with great pride to Reginald.

"Have you seen the contents, Sambo?" asked the latter.

"Me not know how to open him, and dis nigger not open him if he could. Me bring him ober de sea to massa, and massa know what to do wid him."

Reginald touched a spring, and the lid of the casket, flying open, disclosed a set of magnificent jewels, which flashed and sparkled wondrously in the light of the lamp and the fire. They were diamonds and rubies of large size, of exquisite beauty, and evidently of great value.

"When my ancestor left England," said Reginald, "in the time of the Civil War, and made over Aldersleigh to his younger brother, he took this casket, and a sum of ready money, as his portion of the family property. The money bought land in Virginia, which is now lost to me for ever, and I thought the casket had shared the same fate. But, thanks to a strange fortune, and the fidelity of this good fellow, the jewels are once more in my possession, and I think I may fairly claim them as their rightful owner."

"Undoubtedly," said Mr. Strong. "There can be no question as to your title, and, luckily, you need not apply to the United States to confirm it."

"As for that," answered Reginald, with a smile, "had these jewels fallen into the hands of our invaders, I should have sought in vain to recover them. They are spoils rescued from the enemy."

"And how grand Mary will look in all this paraphernalia!" cried George.

"I don't think she would care about it," said Reginald; "and I would rather see her with a ribbon or a flower in her hair."

"You don't mean to say," returned George, "that you have no admiration for precious stones? Especially for such gems as these, which are not easily to be matched?"

"I think they are very pretty," said Reginald; "in some lights even beautiful. But a violent passion for them seems to me characteristic of children or savages. What is your opinion, Jack?"



"If I was a king," answered Rough, "I'd dress up my queen in pearls and diamonds; and a duchess ought to wear 'em in going to court, or a play-actress on the stage. It's part of the show, and helps to amuse the people. But a private man, to my fancy, would like his wife better without so much glare and glitter."

"I agree with you, Jack, entirely," said Reginald. "At all events, such toys are not to be put in comparison with the serious interests of life. Of course, I shall always keep the casket, for the sake of old recollections; but the best use I can make of the jewels is to sell them."

"To sell them!" cried George, in astonishment.

"Yes, my dear fellow; and you must not think me mercenary on that account. If they are of the value I suppose, their sale will enable me to do justice both to myself and others. Even Jack and I may manage to strike a bargain."

"I've told you the price of the land," said

Rough, sturdily, "and I'm not going to be bullied out of it."

"Come, come," interrupted Mr. Strong, "I begin to see my way. Leave everything to your lawyer, and I will try to satisfy all my clients. The family jewels cannot be put to a better purpose than to redeem the family estate. But we will talk no more about it to-night. Jack must remain with you for the present, and to-morrow we will see what is to be done. It is time for me to go home, but I shall be with you the first thing in the morning. And, before I go, I must shake hands with our brave Sambo here. It is to him after all that we are indebted for everything."

"Me, massa? What dis nigger done fur anybody? It all cos ob de poor dog. Ponto dat me ebber find dat leetle box!"

"And who brought it to me across the Atlantic?" cried Reginald; "and worked his way as a cook, when he had this mine of wealth in his possession? But I will not waste words in thanks. Please God, we will never part again in this world!"

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"Yes, massa; me come to stop wid you fur good and all. Massa nebber git rid of dis ere ole nigger no more—dat's a fac!"

Mr. Strong returned in high spirits to Russell Square to surprise his wife and daughter with the strange story of the casket, and the next morning he went with Reginald to a diamond-merchant of his acquaintance to ascertain the quality of the jewels. Through the intervention of the same person, who proved to be really an Israelite devoid of guile, a sale was afterwards effected for a large sum; and Reginald found himself in a position to offer a price for Aldersleigh sufficient to make the transaction much more than nominal, and yet so far below its full value as to retain for Rough the character of munificent dealing.

"I always told you, Jack," said Reginald, "that I was quite willing to lie under heavy obligations to you. The truth is that, by the proposed arrangement, you will make me a present of more than half the estate."

"I don't believe a word of it," replied Rough, with friendly bluntness. "I dare say you're

trying to humbug me all the time. And what the dickens am I to do with thirty thousand pound? I can't keep it, or spend it; and the odds are I shall take to drinking."

"I will trust you for that, my dear Jack, and you need not trouble yourself about the rest. If you leave Mr. Strong to invest the capital for you, and Susan to spend the interest, you will get on well enough."

"Susan! why, bless you, she's never so miserable as when she takes it into her head we may be forced to live like gentlefolks!"

"Now, don't put any obstacles in the way, there's a good fellow! or I shall think you repent of the resolution to make me Squire of Aldersleigh. You can do what you please with the money, and live exactly in your own fashion. But you will be generous in the most generous manner—by serving your friend as *he* wishes it, and not according to your own fancy."

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

## THE WEDDING.

WITH all parties concerned equally disinterested, and the only contest one of justice and liberality on both sides, there could not be much delay or difficulty in coming to terms. Jack's scruples once removed, and matters of mere detail referred to the decision of the lawyers, the necessary documents were soon drawn up and executed, and, a little before Christmas, Reginald Vaughan was in possession of Aldersleigh. Mr. and Mrs. Strong, as well as George, were now his guests at the Hall; but Charlotte and Emma preferred staying with Mary at the Vicarage, and Rough insisted on taking up his old quarters with Morris at the farm.

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They spent a very happy Christmas, and even the severe weather of January, 1867, had no power to check the general satisfaction. The Malvern Hills gleamed white in the wintry blast, and the snow lay thick and deep throughout the Valley of the Severn; but there were warm fires, and warmer hearts, in the old mansion and its allied or tributary dwellings; and the inhabitants hardly felt the rigour of the season, for they were occupied with pleasant thoughts and joyful anticipations of the future.

The thaw and the returning sunshine found them busy with preparations for a double festival. It had been agreed that Reginald and Jack Rough should be married on the same day, and Mary took almost as much interest in the little feminine arrangements for Susan's wedding as in her own. It was a touching sight to see mistress and maid together, retaining their old relation to each other, but united by so many feelings in common. They needed no democratic theories of social equality, to teach them the true love and sympathy of gentle, Christian womanhood.

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The wedding was in harmony with the characters of the chief actors in the ceremony. There was no large gathering, no bustle, no ostentatious display. Reginald came to the church attended by George, and Rough by Morris. Mary had Charlotte and Emma for her bridesmaids, and Susan two of the village girls; and they all looked much prettier in their modest little white bonnets than if they had been decked out in the wreaths and veils of fashionable or theatrical nuptials. Mr. Strong was to give one bride away, and the blacksmith (who had known Susan from her childhood) the other. Arthur Graham accompanied his mother and aunt, but divided his attentions equally between them and Mrs. Strong. William, and Mrs. Sutton, and the servants and villagers generally, were of course present as spectators, and most of them in their best clothes; but the most resplendent figure there was Sambo, in a new suit of divers colours, with an enormous nosegay in his bosom (for which he had stripped the greenhouses at Aldersleigh), and a satin scarf round his neck, of scarlet embroidered with gold.

If a tear stood in the eye of the good Vicar as his darling approached the altar to be united to the man of her choice, he brushed it away hastily, and proceeded to perform the service with all his accustomed dignity and earnestness. His voice may have trembled a little as he pronounced the solemn benediction; but he soon recovered his equanimity, and read the exhortation at the end in the calm, unimpassioned tone of advice and admonition. When they repaired to the little vestry, however, and Mary had signed her maiden name for the last time, the clergyman caught his child in his arms and kissed her with all the fervour of a deep, measureless affection. Then he turned to Reginald, and grasped him warmly by the hand.

"She was my all," he said; "but I think I can trust her to you."

"May God so deal with me," answered Reginald, "as I strive to fulfil that trust!"

"And you must kiss Susan too, papa," said Mary, smiling through her tears, "and Charlotte, and Emma, and all of them."



"Is that really my duty?" asked the Vicar, with the old, merry, genial glance. "Well, I am quite ready to perform it."

So there was more kissing, followed by more hand-shaking and congratulations. And then they all left the church together, and the villagers gave them three hearty, ringing cheers.

In spite of a protest from Jack Rough, who would have preferred to banquet in his own style at the farm, Reginald had insisted that the wedding-party should all breakfast together at the Hall. So, with the exception of the blacksmith, who was deputed to preside in Rough's place at the morning entertainment to the villagers, all those who had taken part in the ceremony proceeded in a body to Aldersleigh.

The great drawing-room was not used on this occasion, as the smaller one was quite large enough for the purpose. There was no pompous exhibition of sumptuous bridal-gifts, vying with each other in cost and splendour, and apparently intended to prove the wealth of the donors rather than their taste or friendship. Mary's wedding

presents were real tokens of affection, not numerous or expensive, but offerings from the hearts of the givers, and she held them too sacred to make a public show of them. The little keepsakes which Susan had received from her old friends and schoolfellows were of a still humbler kind; but they were equally hallowed by the feelings in which they originated, and as far removed above the region of silly and vulgar ostentation.

The breakfast was served in the fine old dining-room, where the dark oaken panels, and the carved canopy above the fireplace, had been decorated with festoons and garlands of evergreens, and all looked as warm and cheerful as was possible in that early season of the year. And around the table, encircled by an atmosphere of love and joy, the mirth and pathos were alike genuine. There was no affectation, no awkwardness, no false sentiment, no straining after effect. And though different classes were united at the same board, and little slips and solecisms might have been noticed by a fastidious critic, there was

really nothing to disturb the common harmony, where all were equally natural, cordial, and sincere. It was the triumph of good sense, and good feeling, and a broad, noble humanity, over all the narrow conventionalism and petty exclusiveness of society.

And no one took more delight in the scene than Mr. Strong. He, the admirer and upholder of the great hierarchy of ranks and orders in the State, felt none of that foolish fear of contact with an inferior, which distinguishes the Higgineses, and men of the like upstart breed. He respected his fellow-creatures, whatever their condition in life, as long as they were simple, honest, unpretending, and was quite ready to associate with them on equal terms. He despised only what was intrinsically base, and kept the full vials of his wrath for falsehood, impudence, and imposture.

As for Dr. Goodenough, his countenance beamed with pleasure, as he gazed around on the well-known faces with the tenderness of a father, the sympathy of a friend, the benevolence of a Christian pastor. When he proposed the health of the

brides and bridegrooms, his words were few and destitute of art, but they called up the recollections of a whole life of affection, and sent the thoughts into the future with a thousand kind hopes and wishes.

Then Reginald and Jack returned thanks, each in his own way, in short and manly speeches. And Mr. Strong drank to the bridesmaids, and George and Morris had to answer for them in a sort of humorous colloquy. And other toasts went round, with unpremeditated jests, and unforced, innocent laughter. And, instead of being a weariness and vexation of spirit, the time flew swiftly by, and all regretted when the hour of departure drew near.

And now, amid a shower of blessings and old shoes, Reginald and Mary set out on their road to Devonshire; but Rough had no mind to travel on his wedding-day, and returned with Susan to the farm, to keep up the festivities in the manner approved by his class, and to give a grand supper in the evening to all his friends in the village. It was only in the course of a day or two, when

the bride was a little recovered from the fatigue of these prolonged revels, that Jack took her with him on a visit to the Forest of Dean, to show her the scenes of his childhood, and to consult with her as to their future plans.

But to go back to the morning of the marriage : when breakfast was over at the Hall, and the carriage containing its new master and mistress had rolled away in the distance, most of the company wandered forth into the park and pleasure-grounds. Mrs. Strong lingered on the terrace with Mrs. Graham, Miss Prior was accompanied by Mrs. Sutton in a tour of the gardens and greenhouses, and Morris carried off the magnificent Sambo to look at some prize-pigs ; but the younger people went for a long stroll in the woods, while Mr. Strong and the Vicar walked up and down the great avenue in earnest conversation.

“How happily it has all come about!” said the lawyer. “Who could have thought, when this young man left his country as a voluntary exile, that he would find the old home waiting for him

in the land of his fathers? And who could have imagined, in the Squire's loneliness and desolation, that the estate would pass to one so worthy of his name and lineage? And all through such an extraordinary series of accidents!"

"My dear friend," replied the Vicar, "I dare say I am considered a very superstitious person; but, somehow or other, I do not believe in accidents. I have a strong faith in the moral government of the universe, not only by general laws, but also by their individual application. Nothing appears to me too insignificant for the care of Him, who directs indeed the planets in their course, but without whose will not a sparrow falls to the ground. And, as far as my experience goes, the guiding hand has been visible to me in many a human life."

"Heaven forbid I should question it!" returned the lawyer. "But His ways are not as our ways, and His modes of dealing with us are often past finding out."

"That is true," said the clergyman. "In the vast majority of cases we can only judge by re-

sults. If sometimes we can trace the process, as when the harvest follows the seedtime, and men gather the fruit of their own husbandry—as when, for instance, this Reginald finds devoted friends and faithful servants, because he has himself been a generous benefactor and kind master, and gratitude is not extinct in the human breast—there are other things which escape all our powers of observation. It is in the long series of apparently unconnected incidents, which are yet found in the sequel to link together, and form the chain of destiny for a man, a family, or a nation, that we acknowledge, without being able to describe or understand, the constant, watchful care of a superintending Providence. Enough for us to recognise the fact, and well for those who derive consolation from it, that, amid all the trials and vicissitudes of life—

‘There’s a Divinity that shapes our ends,  
Rough-hew them how we will!’”

“It is a consoling idea,” said Mr. Strong; “but only because we believe in a Father’s love, instead of the dark, awful, relentless Fate of the

ancients. But, to descend to less solemn themes, have you heard that this marriage is likely to be followed by others?"

"I have been told so," replied the Vicar, "and what I have seen to-day tends to confirm it. I hope your daughters' engagements meet with your approval?"

"I have really nothing to object to them. My nephew is a good fellow at bottom, and will turn out better than was expected; and as for Arthur Graham, he seems to be very fond of that excellent mother of his, which is always so much in his favour. They are not rich, certainly; but the old lawyer has contrived to feather his nest pretty well, and my girls will have something now, and more when their mother and I take our departure. George must stick to his profession, in which I have the means to help him forward; but I would rather see Arthur in the Militia, and not obliged to go out to India again. I may perhaps buy some land for him, and get him settled somewhere at home."



"It would be the greatest possible comfort to Mrs. Graham and Miss Prior," said the Vicar.

"I will try and manage it, Goodenough. I should like to have all our young folks within reach of us, that you, [and I, and my dear old woman, might play with our grandchildren in our old age. Then, if those confounded Radicals would but leave us alone, and not overturn everything, and throw the country into confusion, we might look for a serene sunset after a fair day's work."

"Do not trouble yourself about the Radicals, my dear friend. We shall find a few Jack Roughts yet, to stand between us and revolution. And, after all, these national issues, like the private ones, are in the hands of the same Providence of which we were just now speaking. If we trust in Him, and do our duty, He will defend us from every danger, and make the rude elements, which sometimes seem to be threatening our destruction, so many sources of new life and vigour to our country :

'Even so doth God protect us, if we be  
Virtuous and wise. Winds blow, and waters roll,  
Strength to the brave, and power, and deity,  
Yet in themselves are nothing. One decree  
Spake laws to them—and said, that by the soul  
Only the nations shall be great and free!'

In such discourse the two old friends spent the afternoon of that happy day, and then returned to the Hall, to pass a quiet evening with the rest of their party. On the morrow there was a general dispersion of the guests; and the Vicar, left alone with his dogs and his books, often raised his eyes from a favourite volume, as if in search of some familiar presence, and sighed gently as he looked down again, and patted the spaniel or terrier at his feet. But he had pleasant letters from Mary all bright with the golden hues of love and hope, which cast a glory over every scene she visited, and turned the fair shores of Devon into a paradise.

Still, it was with a feeling of no ordinary joy that Doctor Goodenough welcomed back his daughter and her husband to their home at Alders-

leigh. And from that time there has been daily intercourse between the Hall and the Vicarage, and the old relations are revived in the most tender and touching form.

And Reginald and Mary are not only happy in their union, but all the people about them have reason to be grateful for their presence. The old mansion at Aldersleigh is once more the centre of hospitality and kindness to the country round—hospitality without extravagance, and kindness without ostentation—and its inhabitants are the friends, the benefactors, and the examples of all their poorer neighbours. They leave no duty undischarged, they neglect no opportunity of good; and so, with a free conscience, they can roam at ease through their sylvan domain, and enjoy the beauties of nature and the delights of literature and art. It is like a pretty midsummer idyll, when Mary sits sketching in the woods, and Reginald reads to her from Chaucer, or Spenser, or some other well of English undefiled; and, of late, they have added “Jason” and the “Earthly

Paradise" to their list, and found to their surprise that our language has once again a poet as lucid, as flowing, and as picturesque as those sweet singers of yore.

This cheerful, out-of-doors life has only once been interrupted for a short time—and that was on the occasion of the birth of an heir of Aldersleigh.

In the pleasant country which lies between the Severn and the Wye, Jack Rough has bought himself a small farm. There he works hard with his own hands, lives frugally and simply, and will train his children to habits of honest labour. Susan makes him a good wife, and he loves her with all the strength of his manly, uncorrupted nature. Of course, he has plenty of money to spare, for Mr. Strong invested his capital for him to the best advantage. But nothing will induce him to change his mode of living, and no one can tell what he does with his surplus income. Only, somehow or other, Mr. Crosby is better supplied than heretofore with funds for his poor people in Bethnal Green; and that gentleman has been

furnished by an *unknown friend* with the means of sending his clever son to Oxford, and his sick daughter to Mentone. And old Madame Laroche has removed from her confined lodgings to comfortable apartments in the neighbourhood of Victoria Park. And many a worthy fellow, in different parts of the country, has been cheered, in the midst of toils and privations, by some kindly token of remembrance from a *former comrade*. And when those unhappy brickmakers, obstinately bent on their own ruin, had brought themselves by their strikes and unions to the very verge of starvation, some quite unexpected assistance was contributed by a *free workman*, to save their wives and families from the horrors and miseries of famine. Altogether, on the great day of account, Jack's expenditure may chance to pass muster in the general audit, and even to bear comparison with that of some persons of higher claims and pretensions.

Mr. Strong continues, as he has ever been, the sturdy champion of the Church, the Queen, and

the Constitution. He is ready, as in years gone by, to fling down his glove to all comers, and challenge them to mortal combat in defence of what he believes to be the right. He distrusts the passion for innovation; despises the cant of philosophy, and hates all Radicals with a perfect hatred; but his generosity is more comprehensive than his antipathies, and his prejudices never interfere with kind actions to his fellow-creatures. His daughters are both married, and his sons-in-law placed in a fair way of advancement by his bounty. Of course, he is often at Aldersleigh, and takes care of the interests of the family, as his father and grandfather did before him, and as George (although in another branch of the profession) will probably do after him. The old alliance between the Vaughans and the Stronges is not likely to terminate with this generation.

As for the good Vicar, he offers up frequent thanks to Heaven for all the blessings that crown the mild evening of his life. His daughter has not been taken from him, but happily settled in

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the place endeared to them both by so many recollections; the last wish of his old friend is gratified, and Aldersleigh in the hands most worthy of the trust; and he has held his grandchild in his arms at the same font where his own Mary was christened, in the church where sleeps the wife of his bosom, and where one day he will rest beside her. No conflicting feelings draw him away from the scenes he has known so long, from the simple people he has loved, and taught, and served. And so, with a quiet mind and grateful heart, he may go on to the close in the performance of his sacred task—the noblest that can be committed to man—the task of instructing the ignorant, consoling the afflicted, reclaiming the lost, and preserving, amid the pride and folly of a sceptical and irreverent age, the great Christian traditions of humility and obedience, of duty to God, and faith in immortality.

THE END.

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